

FRENCH FOREIGN LÉGIONNAIRE 1890–1914



MARTIN WINDROW

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

WARRIOR • 157

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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FRENCH FOREIGN LÉGIONNAIRE 1890–1914

INTRODUCTION

Under the Third Republic born of France's defeat by Germany in 1870, the French infantry was divided between three separate organizations. The 144 Line regiments of l'Armée Métropolitaine (Metropolitan Army) – young men conscripted for (by 1890) three years' service with the colours – were based in France, training for the day when they would recapture the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The Troupes de Marine (Naval Troops) – raised entirely from volunteers after 1893 – garrisoned naval bases at home and overseas, and provided field forces for the colonies in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. By 1896 there were 12 white naval infantry regiments, plus six regiments of native *tirailleurs* ('skirmishers', light infantry) in West Africa, Madagascar and Indochina, raised and officered by the Troupes de Marine. Line and naval infantry regiments each had three battalions. Finally, French North Africa (Algeria and Tunisia) was garrisoned by l'Armée d'Afrique (Africa Army) – designated as XIX Army Corps. From the 1880s this, like the other two organizations, also provided task-organized 'marching units' for colonial expeditions. These *régiments* and *bataillons de marche* were formed with men selected from a number of the permanent 'organic' regiments.

The infantry of the Armée d'Afrique included four Algerian *tirailleur* regiments of Arab volunteers led by white officers, and four white *zouave* regiments, largely raised by short-service conscription from the settler population; unlike the Metropolitan and Naval infantry, both these types of regiment had four battalions. There were also four single penal battalions of Infanterie Légère d'Afrique (Africa Light Infantry, the 'Bats d'Af', composed of French civilian or military criminals); and the all-volunteer Légion Étrangère (Foreign Legion). By 1890 the Legion consisted of two regiments each with a large depot element and four 1,000-man battalions. After 1891, regimental establishment increased to five battalions each, with a second depot company, and again to six battalions from 1900; both the 1er and 2e Régiments Étrangers (1st and 2nd Foreign Regiments, RE) were headquartered in Oran province in western Algeria.

The Legion thus provided by far the largest of the French Army's white infantry regiments and the only ones raised entirely from long-service volunteers, and, as foreign mercenaries, their casualties in battle or from disease were politically acceptable. Most colonial expeditions outside North Africa were the prerogative of the Troupes de Marine, but by 1890 the Legion

had proved their superior hardihood and endurance during seven years' costly campaigning in Indochina (Vietnam). Since the Army and Navy were competitive, as the French Empire expanded Legion units would increasingly be deployed as the Army's spearhead in far-off, fever-ridden hellholes.

Each Foreign Regiment, commanded by a lieutenant-colonel, comprised four to six rifle battalions, a headquarters staff and a large reception, training and depot element. Each battalion was commanded by a *chef de bataillon* (major), seconded by a *capitaine adjudant-major* and a lieutenant *officier d'approvisionnement* in charge of logistics and communications. The battalion had four rifle companies each with a captain, two lieutenants and 200–250 rankers. Companies were divided into *pelotons* (half-companies) of at least 100, *sections* (platoons) of 50–60, and *groupes* (squads) of 25–30 rankers.

In 1890, four of the Legion's eight battalions were stationed in Algeria, which had been almost entirely peaceful for the past eight years, except in the far south of Oran Department – the 'Sud-Oranais'. The other four were in North Vietnam, where widely dispersed security garrisons were still having to provide men for continuing campaigns of pacification.

CHRONOLOGY

1890	Legion has eight battalions: in Tonkin (North Vietnam), the I/1st and II/1st RE (i.e. 1st & 2nd Bns of 1st RE), III/2nd and IV/2nd RE; in Algeria, the III/1st and IV/1st RE, I/2nd and II/2nd RE.
November 1891	V/1st and V/2nd RE ordered raised, enlarging Legion to ten battalions.
December 1899	VI/1st and VI/2nd REs ordered raised, enlarging Legion to 12 battalions.

Algerian/Moroccan border:

1890	Construction of railway southwards through the Sud-Oranais reaches border HQ at Ain Sefra.
During 1890s	Two of the battalions based in Algeria are rotated at intervals to the Sud-Oranais, along the debatable frontier with the still independent sovereign state of Morocco. They and their detached mounted (mule) companies reconnoitre in force in attempts to deter cross-border raiding; map, build tracks and sink wells; establish temporary, then permanent posts; patrol from them, and escort camel convoys supplying them.
Winter 1899/1900	French occupation of Touat oasis complex in south-west Algeria enrages tribes.
March–June 1900	V/1st RE establish posts at Igli and Taghit, c.320km (200 miles) south-south-west of Ain Sefra.

April–July 1900	Half of I/2nd RE make 1,825km (1,134-mile) round-trip march across southern plains and Great Western Sand Sea.
July 1900	Combat near Zafrani Wells by 1st Mtd Coy, 1st RE. Arab raiding from Moroccan territory continues thereafter.
July 1901	Nominal joint authority over border area agreed with Sultan of Morocco, but no significant Moroccan forces are deployed there.
1901–03	French attempts to stiffen authority of Sultan against his rebels in northern Morocco largely fail. Meanwhile, intermittent raids continue crossing from south-east Morocco into Algeria, many coordinated from Figuig oasis just inside Morocco. Light French casualties in frequent small clashes.
May 1903	Governor-General of Algeria, escorted by 18th and 19th Mtd Coys, 1st RE, is fired upon after parley at Figuig.
June 1903	Two battalions of 2nd RE cover the shelling, and rapid surrender, of Figuig. Half of 22nd Mtd Coy, 2nd RE, takes part in punitive raids inside Morocco.
August 1903	Half of 22nd Mtd Coy takes part in successful defence of Taghit fort.
September 1903	Other half of 22nd Mtd Coy (Capt. Vauchez) virtually wiped out in major ambush at El Mouggar.
October 1903	General Hubert Lyautey a veteran of North Vietnam and Madagascar, appointed to command Ain Sefra Sub-Division.
1903–06	Lyautey employs Legion mounted companies as spearhead for oasis-by-oasis campaigns into eastern Morocco, anchored on new posts held thereafter by infantry companies; four of the Legion battalions then in Algeria rotate through the Sud-Oranais. Units are also deployed for development of tracks, waterholes and protected markets to support pacification and trade.
December 1906	General Lyautey, is promoted to command Oran Division, covering whole of west Algeria.
Morocco:	
August 1907	VI/1st RE among troops (under General Drude) landed to quell anti-European violence at Casablanca on Atlantic coast of western Morocco. Naval shelling inflames the situation.

September 1907	I/ and IV/2nd RE are among reinforcements landed at Casablanca. Thereafter, operations develop on two separate fronts in Morocco, still ostensibly 'in support of the Sultan' against his rebels: on the western Chaouia plain, and on the Moulouya River front on the north-east Moroccan/north-west Algerian border.
December 1907	Two and a half battalions of 1st RE operate in Beni Snassen hills on Moulouya front.
April–September 1908	General d'Amade's successful operations on Chaouia plain. August and September 1908, VI/1st RE and IV/2nd RE recalled to Algeria.
April–September 1908	Operations in south-east Morocco by three battalions of 2nd RE, with two mounted companies of 1st RE.
April 1908	Costly defence of overnight camp at Menabha oasis.
May 1908	Capture of Boudenib oasis.
August–September 1908	Defence of and decisive victory at Boudenib, pacifying south-east Morocco.
1909–10	Continual operations by mounted companies on north-east Moroccan front.
1910	I/2nd RE operate in western Morocco; III/ and VI/1st RE and IV/2nd RE operate in north-east Morocco.
1911	Three battalions of 1st RE operate on Moulouya front.
May 1911	Half of I/2nd RE operates in western Morocco against rebels besieging capital, Fez. On Moulouya front, half-company (Capt. Labordette) of VI/1st RE wiped out at Alouana.
March 1912	Sultan forced to hand over Moroccan government to French Protectorate, headed by General Lyautey.
May 1912	Second siege of Fez; I/1st and VI/2nd RE operate in western Morocco. Continuing violent resistance to Protectorate requires major campaigns by a French army that will grow to nearly 70,000 by mid-1914.
1912–14	Operations in western Morocco by three battalions of 2nd RE, plus (1912) one of 1st RE; operations in eastern Morocco by three battalions of 1st RE; mounted companies also active on both fronts.
May 1914	Forces from west (General Gouraud) and east (General Baumgarten) meet at Taza, north-east Morocco, finally

	opening direct communications and supply lines with Algerian bases. Fighting continues in hills.
June 1914	VI/2nd RE operates from Mrirt on edge of unpacified Middle Atlas.
July 1914	Warning of impending war in Europe halts all offensive operations.
Deployments to Dahomey (West Africa), Madagascar and Tonkin:	
August 1892	Marching battalion raised from both REs for Dahomey; survivors withdrawn December 1892.
Early 1893	Dahomey marching battalion rebuilt with replacements; withdrawn February 1894.
July 1893	Marching battalion formed for aborted Siam expedition; remains in South Vietnam and Laos; half withdrawn May 1897, half December 1904.
February 1894	Marching half-battalion shipped to Niger, West Africa; withdrawn January 1895.
August 1895	Marching battalion raised for invasion of Madagascar; survivors withdrawn December 1895.
August 1896	Second marching battalion raised for General Gallieni's continued pacification of Madagascar.
October 1897	I/1st RE withdrawn from Tonkin to Algeria.
December 1898	Two extra marching companies shipped to Madagascar; withdrawn September 1899.
March 1900	IV/1st and II/2nd RE reinforce Madagascar; withdrawn respectively April 1901 and November 1903.
July 1901	One marching battalion each from 1st and 2nd RE reinforce Tonkin; withdrawn December 1901.
October 1903	V/2nd RE shipped to Tonkin to restore garrison to four battalions – now designated II/ and IV/1st RE, III/ and V/2nd RE.
1904–July 1905	Marching battalion on Madagascar withdrawn, company by company.
November 1907	III/2nd RE withdrawn from Tonkin to Algeria.
1908–09	Renewed unrest in Tonkin. (During 1912–14 the Legion garrison is further reduced to two battalions.)

RECRUITMENT

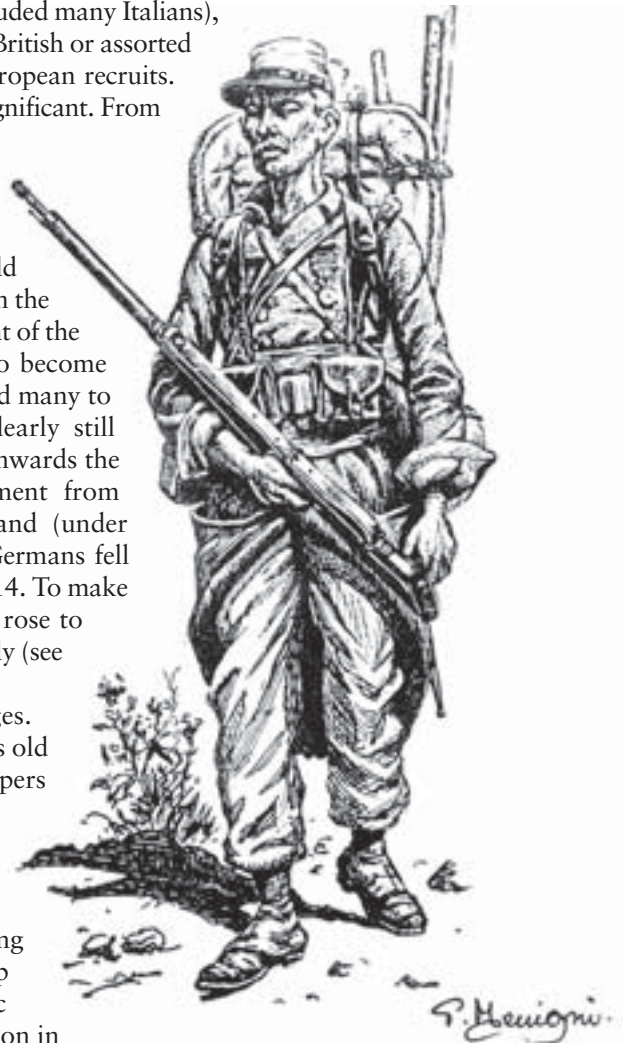
Class, nationality and age

The men who enlisted in the Legion during these years came from a wide variety of backgrounds. An averaged analysis of 1885 and 1898 gives roughly 21 per cent manual labourers and 10 per cent shopworkers. Among skilled tradesmen, there were (oddly) no less than 7 per cent locksmiths and clocksmiths; 5.8 per cent had been shoemakers, 5 per cent bakers, 3.6 per cent masons, 3 per cent blacksmiths, 2.8 per cent carpenters and the same number tailors, 2.5 per cent butchers, and 2.4 per cent painters and decorators. The Legion's traditional ability to find within its ranks virtually any skill it required – particularly for building – is thus easily explicable. Interestingly, roughly 11 per cent came from middle-class backgrounds; then, as always, some young men from respectable families gave way to temptations that cost them their good name and prospects.

An analysis of the claimed nationalities in the ranks in 1896–97 (the qualification is important – men sometimes lied) gives roughly 26 per cent from Alsace-Lorraine, 25 per cent Germans, 18 per cent Frenchmen, 17 per cent Belgians, 10 per cent Swiss and 3.5 per cent Austrians. Less than 1 per cent each claimed to be Spanish (for some reason this included many Italians), Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Greek, Turkish, British or assorted oddities; there were also a tiny minority of non-European recruits. The high proportion of Alsatians and Lorrainers is significant. From the loss of those provinces to Germany in 1871, until 1880, Legion recruitment had been officially (but not strictly) reserved for them. Legally now German subjects, so liable for German Army conscription, they – like any other foreigners – could gain French nationality by serving a five-year hitch in the Legion. In c.1885 they had made up about 45 per cent of the rank and file; in 1889 a new law allowed them to become naturalized before enlistment, but while this diverted many to French Line regiments, a substantial minority clearly still preferred the Legion. However, from about 1903 onwards the national composition changed markedly. Enlistment from Alsace-Lorraine dropped to about 6 per cent, and (under German government pressure) the percentage of Germans fell from 34 per cent in 1904 to less than half that by 1914. To make up for this the proportion of Frenchmen accepted rose to about 45 per cent, but their quality dropped markedly (see below, 'Discipline').

Recruits were naturally vague about their ages. Officially any healthy man between 18 and 40 years old could enlist, but if he chose not to show identity papers the Legion usually took him at his word. The averaged analysis of 1885–98 gives 27 per cent claiming to be under 20 years old, 56 per cent in their 20s, 16 per cent in their 30s, and a handful admitting to being over 40. A few young teenagers and 50-year-olds certainly managed to slip through the net, but the Legion memoirist Frederic Martyn reckoned that in the 1890s a high proportion in

Perfectly exemplifying the popular image of the légionnaire (apart from the fact that he wears no sun-flap with his képi-cover), this Pierre Benigni drawing of a veteran sergeant in campaign dress, 1910, appeared in the commemorative *Livre d'Or de la Légion Étrangère* published for the centenary of the corps in 1931. The climate of the Moroccan interior plateaux – much like that of the American high plains – varies from blazing hot and dusty in summer, to freezing and wet or snowy in winter, and in the desert the nights are always very cold. The greatcoat was the habitual field dress in all seasons.



the ranks were actually in their mid-30s, a substantial majority of them with previous military service in the French or other armies. This maturity and background helps explain the Legion's unusual effectiveness and endurance on active service, particularly when compared with young Line and Navy conscripts sent to Africa and the Far East.

Motives for enlistment

Hunger and unemployment (or the prospect of a shotgun marriage) were the steadiest recruiting sergeants. For some the offer of French citizenship after five years' service was attractive, and the minority who survived 15 years could look forward to a modest pension. A proportion of enlistees had good reasons for wanting to disappear, but by this date the police filter was fairly efficient – at least in the case of French citizens – and most of the lurid tales of serious criminals in the ranks are apocryphal. There were, however, many stories of less willing foreign recruits – men arrested in France for petty crimes or simple vagrancy, and presented by the police with the choice of enlisting in the Legion or facing a prison sentence.

A Legion lieutenant-colonel, wearing a caped blue-grey coat displaying rank tabs, with an Algerian captain of Spahi cavalry. Alongside the white regiments of Chasseurs d'Afrique (Africa Light Horse), the Spahis provided the cavalry for each division of XIX Army Corps. In Oran Division, the 2nd Spahis had barracks just across the road from the 1st RE's Quartier Viénot in Sidi bel Abbès, and squadrons and battalions often served together in the field in the Sud-Oranais. Much popular history and fiction devoted to the Legion ignores its integration with the other regiments of the Armée d'Afrique, but both in North Africa and further afield the characteristic structure of any field command – be it a desert column or an expeditionary force – was a balanced mixture of native and white units. (Courtesy AdeQ Historical Archives)



Le présent Livret, contenant quarante pages, appartient à

Nom *Seewald*
écrit en lettres

Prénoms : *Gustave*

Surnoms :

Né le *1^{er} Mars 1882*
à *Hamm*
canton d *Westphalie*
département d *Allemagne*
résidant à *Hamm*
canton d *Westphalie*
département d *Allemagne*
Profession d *Commis*
Fils de *Désiré*
et de *Jeanne Florentine Marie*
domiciliés à *Hamm*
canton d *Westphalie*
département d *Allemagne*
Marié le _____
à _____
alors domiciliée à _____
département d _____
autorisation d _____

Cheveux *br*
Sourcils *blonds*
Yeux *gris*
Front *haut*
Nes *moyen*
Bouche *moyenne*
Menton *long*
Visage *ovale*
Taille : 1 mètre *71* cent.

Marques particulières :

Jeune soldat (1) _____
de la classe de 18 _____ de la subdivision d _____
n° _____ de tirage dans le canton d _____

ou Engagé *Volontaire* le *vingt* an d. le *37 Avril 92*
à *Verdun*, département d *la Meuse*

A été compris sur la liste de recrutement de la classe de 18 _____, de la subdivision d _____, n° _____ de tirage dans le canton de _____

Numéro au registre matricule du recrutement .	Partie de la liste de recrutement cantonal.	Numéro de la liste matricule. <i>141</i>
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(1) Appelé ou classé dans les services auxiliaires.

Livret individuel d'homme de troupe.

The anti-Legion propaganda of the German government clearly did not dissuade Gustav Seewald, an illiterate 21-year-old shopworker from Hamm in Westphalia, whose paybook shows that he crossed over to enlist at Verdun in April 1903. He was 1.71m (5ft. 6in.) tall, with blond hair and grey eyes. His mother's name was entered as Désiré, suggesting that she was French.

Frenchmen had been legally allowed to enlist since 1881, so long as they could prove that they had completed their obligatory service in the Armée Métropolitaine. Those unwilling to produce their papers usually claimed to be Belgian or Swiss, and a man was accepted under any name he gave. Volunteering for the Legion or the Troupes de Marine – from 1900, renamed Troupes Coloniales (Colonial Troops) – appealed to Frenchmen who had acquired a taste for soldiering during their compulsory service but who now sought travel and action rather than re-enlisting in the home army for yet more years of boring routine in dull French provincial garrisons.

THE TRAINEE; SIDI BEL ABBÈS, c.1890

(1) This légionnaire undergoing basic training is risking a furtive cigarette (*'cibiche'*) during barrack fatigues in the Quartier Viénot. He wears the basic cool-weather barracks dress of all ranks below sergeant, virtually unchanged over 40 years. The M1884 French infantry képi bears, instead of the regimental number of the *'lignards'*, the Legion's red seven-flame *'grenade'* (shell) badge, introduced in 1875. The French soldier's sky-blue calico *cravate* is almost hidden by the closed collar of the M1867 *veste* or *'ras-de-cul'*, which bears the red regimental numeral on the collar patches. The red wool trousers hang unconfined, breaking at the instep of his low shoes. A pair of these old *souliers* continued to be issued for barracks dress and walking out, in addition to the two pairs of ankle boots (*brodequins*). For formal duties or walking out the soldier added a pair of old M1867 white canvas spatterdash gaiters (see 12), worn over the shoes but under the trousers.

(2) Although the French Army had authorized white fatigue trousers in May 1879, it was not until May 1882 that a matching fatigue blouse (*bourgeron*) was ordered. By the 1890s two main versions were seen in the Legion: the 'model for native soldiers', which unbuttoned all the way down, and that 'for infantry', which was a pullover garment. Either type might have the neck button centred, or off-set to the right to engage with a cross-over tab. Some Legion photos from the early 1900s still show the Army's original M1882 pullover blouse; this had the body and sleeves cut very full, with a long front vent buttoned at throat and mid-chest, and a stand-and-fall 'modern shirt-type' collar, usually worn open and folded down. Faintly grey when first issued, fatigues soon bleached white with frequent washing.

(3) In March 1899 the Army's new M1897 single-breasted tunic was authorized for all enlisted ranks. Resembling the officers' M1893 tunic, this was a midnight-blue jacket without visible pockets. The patches on the red collar bore dark blue regimental numerals; the cuffs had three-button red patches, and, for re-enlisted men, red piping (replacing the old red re-enlistment chevrons that had been worn on the upper left sleeve). There were seven domed brass front buttons bearing the name of the corps round the edge, and three more each side of the rear vent, which was tailored *'à la Soubise'*. The Legion's distinctive green and red fringed epaulettes were looped and buttoned to the shoulders. This example shows the red buglehorn left sleeve badge indicating a marksmanship qualification. The tunic might be worn by rankers for parade or walking-out dress with the red or the white trousers, according to daily orders; sergeants and above wore it for most formal duties.

The following items are taken from general French infantry sources of the period 1890–1914, rather than specifically from Legion collections: (4) A soldier's 'housewife' or sewing kit (*trousse*), this one individually made from scrap uniform cloth; légionnaires had to make running repairs to their clothing themselves. Note the spare buttons, scissors, and a combination thread-bobbin and needle case, with a cylindrical thimble. (5) Brass buttonstick, and polishing brush. (6) Two-sided tin, holding grease and polish. (7) Rifle-cleaning brush. (8) Leather-polishing or clothes brush. (9) Bag for a soldier's small kit – polishes, brushes, etc. Like most other cloth items, it usually bore the stamped regimental designation (*tampon*), and the soldier's serial number (*matricule*). (10) Issue handkerchief; and printed *mouchoir d'instruction*. A whole series of these 'educational handkerchiefs' appeared between c.1880–1900, printed with such subjects as sequences of rank insignia, diagrams and *aide mémoire* texts concerning field hygiene, crossing water obstacles, stowing knapsacks, field-stripping rifles, and so on. The corner panels bore inspiring vignettes recalling heroic combats. Examples have been found bearing the regimental stamps of the Legion. (11) Two-sided boot brush. (12) M1867 gaiters. These white canvas spats were used with the old-fashioned low shoes for formal barracks and walking-out dress, but were neither necessary with – nor fitted easily over – the M1881 ankle boots. Légionnaire Martyn was also issued a pair of the black leather version in 1889, but these were discontinued throughout the Army in 1896 at the latest. In the field, légionnaires usually wore the trousers unconfined, bunched and tied, or (from c.1897–1903) with a short pair of individually or unit-made four-button anklets, of old greatcoat cloth with leather reinforcing strips. (13) Ankle boots (*brodequins napolitaines*) were first ordered for the French infantry in 1881. The soles had domed hobnails, the heels flat nails. Serious care was taken to issue Legion recruits with well-fitted boots, and they were taught to grease them thoroughly. They were issued Russian-style footcloths instead of socks; wrapping these so as to avoid chafing and blisters took practice, and some seasoned soldiers preferred simply to grease their bare feet with tallow.



LEFT

The original 1913 caption names this légionnaire as Verollet, a Frenchman, with 12 years' service and 15 campaigns. He wears a covered képi and his greatcoat, with the collar number '1' for 1st RE. Identifiable among his decorations are the Colonial and Morocco medals. If he enlisted in 1901, then he was already a veteran before the numbers of French recruits began to mushroom – and their quality to decrease markedly – from about 1906.



RIGHT

'Peter, Swiss-German; two years' service, two campaigns'; in the late 1890s about 10 per cent of the Legion claimed to be Swiss. All these portraits are from the many photos of individuals and scenes at the Legion's depots published in the July 1913 issue of the magazine *L'Illustration*, as part of a French attempt to counter Germany's anti-Legion propaganda campaign.

Literate French ex-conscripts could expect rapid promotion to NCO rank in the Legion, and might even make sergeant in as little as two years. (Their limited French made it harder for foreigners to climb the step up from the *troupes* to the *sous-officiers*, which depended upon literacy, intelligence, a fairly clean conduct sheet and patient application. Even the renowned Cpl. Minnaert, a decorated Belgian hero of Tonkin, took seven more years to get his gold stripe.) After two years in their rank, ambitious sergeants could apply to study for the admission exams for the Saint-Maixent aspirant officers' academy, in the hope of becoming sub-lieutenants and eventually captains – though rather elderly ones, since Army officer promotion was glacially slow in this period. (It took any sub-lieutenant at least ten years after graduating from military academy to reach captain, and at least another 12 years to reach major, by which time he was in his mid-40s. Those who came up through the ranks would be at least five years older.)

Nevertheless, this prospect appealed to some Frenchmen who had narrowly failed to qualify for entry to Saint-Cyr for *ab initio* officer training, and even to quite a number of former Line officers who had left the Army. After regretting a hasty resignation, or falling into disgrace or poverty, such men saw the Legion as a second chance to climb the military ladder. For example, a diary of 1889 mentions three ex-officers in the ranks of a single company – a Bavarian, a Hungarian, but also a French former captain of Cuirassiers. Again, in 1896 the 47-year-old Captain de Traversay was serving at Viet Tri in Tonkin; graduating from Saint-Cyr in 1869, he had resigned in the mid-1870s, but after falling on hard times he had enlisted in the Legion and regained his rank after some 20 years. Unlike Britain's officer corps, that of France had by law included, for many generations, a two-thirds majority of commissioned former NCOs. This hangover from the 1789 Revolution ensured that there was less social stigma attached to commissions from the ranks, and these were not limited, as in Britain, to quartermasters' commissions.

As well as Alsatians and Lorrainers, many Germans – particularly from the anti-Prussian southern states – enlisted in order to escape conscription into the German Army, which had a reputation for brutality. Some were deserters, like the 19-year-old Wurttemberg stonemason Max Mader, who went over the wall in 1899 after striking back at a brutal NCO (and who would rise in the Legion to become a much-decorated senior warrant officer by the time he was invalided out, with an empty sleeve, in 1918). Others who



LEFT

'Roidi, Turkish; two years' service, two campaigns'. This légionnaire of 1st RE wears the tunic for parade or walking-out dress, complete with the green and red epaulettes. In the late 1890s about 90 per cent of légionnaires were German, Alsatian, French, Belgian or Swiss; fewer than 1 per cent each claimed to be Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Greek, Turkish or British.

RIGHT

'Dorozinski, Polish; two years' service, two campaigns'. His Morocco Medal does indeed bear two of the four clasps that were awarded for it – 'Casablanca', 'Oujda', 'Haut-Guir' and simply 'Maroc' (see Plate H).

had completed their German service sought travel and adventure, like Jean Pfirmann, a 24-year-old from Woerth in Bavaria, who left a vivid diary of service in Tonkin. Despite a virulent German propaganda campaign from 1903, which sought to discourage Legion enlistment by spreading hair-raising tales of cruelty and degradation, such men would sometimes claim that they were better treated in the Legion than in their own army.

Among the very few British or American recruits, most were ex-soldiers or seamen who found themselves in France without funds or other prospects – like Frederic Martyn, who enlisted in Paris in 1889 more or less on a whim, though with the advantages of a good command of French and German, as well as British Army experience. He wrote that the Legion received about 100 recruits a week, but during five years' service in a corps of 8,000–10,000 men he only ever met about a dozen other British légionnaires. His countryman George Manington, who in 1890 also enlisted at the main recruiting office in the Rue Sainte-Dominique, had been living in Paris for two years as a medical student. Both these Englishmen reported that the recruiting officer warned them in explicit terms what they were letting themselves in for, and urged them to reconsider.

Enlistment and processing

Volunteers could start the process at any Gendarmerie station in France, where they would be directed to the nearest army recruiting office, the busiest of these being in Paris and in cities near the borders. After a fairly cursory medical examination, which weeded out few except those who were actually disabled or coughing blood, they signed a contract of engagement for five years, and were given travel money and a railway warrant to the port of Marseille. There they were quartered in the Armée d'Afrique's transit depot at Fort Saint-Nicolas while awaiting passage across the Mediterranean to Algeria. After the 48-hour voyage to Oran they spent another day or two hanging around Fort Saint-Grégoire or Fort Sainte-Thérèse (often hearing blood-curdling tales from old sweats), before being taken by rail across the agricultural plains of the long-settled northern Algerian *Tell*, either to the Sidi bel Abbès depot of the 1st RE, or the Saida headquarters of the 2nd RE. Soon the group of 30–40 recruits were marching in between the guardhouses, and onto the broad parade square flanked by shade-trees and tall brick-and-stone barrack blocks. Here their transformation from '*pekings*' ('b****y civilians') into légionnaires would begin.

TRAINING

The regimental depot ‘companies’ were often in fact of battalion size, or even larger; for example, in 1887 Jean Pfirmann’s numbered no fewer than 1,600 men. There was often no room for them all in barracks, and George Manington spent the snowy early months of 1890 with 600 other trainees in eight-man bell tents. The size of the intakes naturally stretched the available officers very thin, and threw too much unsupervised responsibility onto the sergeants and warrant officers; the rank and file very seldom saw a commissioned officer except at a distance.

New recruits (*‘bleus’*) lucky enough to be assigned to one of the depot company’s barrack rooms were given a cold-water hose-down, issued their serial number (*matricule*) and a mountain of clothing and kit (see Plate A), and handed over to an old soldier to ‘show them the ropes’. To discourage attempts at desertion they were forbidden to keep their civilian clothes, which were sold for them in the town for a few francs. They were shown how to keep themselves, their underclothes and fatigues clean in the *‘lavabos’* on the ground floor of the barracks (washrooms – where hot water was a rare

B

EVENING IN A BARRACK ROOM, QUARTIER VIÉNOT, LATE 1890s

This scene is based on contemporary drawings by Eugène Chaperon of French Line conscripts, on photographs of barrack rooms at Sidi bel Abbès at various dates, and on the memoir by Frederic Martyn. It depicts légionnaires after their return from the canteen and evening rollcall at 9pm, cleaning their kit and taking their ease until ‘Lights Out’ at 10pm.

Barrack rooms at the 1st RE depot were on three floors of the large, four-storey, U-shaped building. Each was about 23 by 6m (75 by 20ft), with a high ceiling, doors on either side, and windows and rifle racks at either end. Each held the 24–30 beds of a half-platoon – two half-squads, each under a corporal, who had the end bed. Since the men ate their mid-morning and late-afternoon meals here, foldaway trestle tables and benches were placed in the middle of the room, and utensils were kept in the hanging ceiling-cupboards overhead.

The beds were simply two iron trestles with three wooden planks supporting a hard straw-packed mattress and bolster, with a sleeping bag of coarse sheeting and two wool blankets; mattress and bedding were folded up during the day. The légionnaire had nowhere to keep his clothing and kit except the shelf and hooks above his bedspace, which was identified by a card with his name and number (it would be years before he was provided with a small locked box for his personal effects). His different garments were folded to a precise elbow-to-fingertip measurement and stacked in a rigidly squared-off pile on the shelf, topped with his knapsack. Hooks held his belt order, Y-straps and knapsack straps, canteen, haversack and bags for his small kit; boots and shoes were kept under the end of his bed. His issue towel was often arranged so as to screen his clothing or hanging kit.

- (1) These soldiers wear their shirts and long drawers of blue-and-white or red-and-white ticking material, and/or white fatigues. The légionnaire in the foreground has stripped his belt and is coating it with black wax before polishing it; note his issue braces (suspenders), and sky-blue *cravate*.
- (2) The corporal in the background wears his képi, the Legion’s sky-blue sash, and a buttoned chest tab showing his rank stripes.
- (3) He is addressing the day’s room orderly, who carries a jug; this soldier wears the M1897 fatigue sidecap of greatcoat cloth.
- (4) The veteran wearing the issue cotton nightcap (*calotte*) is showing off his tattoos to a young recruit; tattooing was often crudely done by the men themselves, but might be professional, extensive and imaginative. Georges d’Esparbes published a photo of a man whose whole chest was covered with a lubricious scene of ‘Venus Awakening’, attended by three winged lovers. He also claimed to have seen the legendary ‘Fox Hunt’ tattoo, with mounted huntsmen and ladies and some 60 hounds spiralling all over the soldier’s upper body, down to the tip of the fox’s brush protruding from the crevice where it had ‘gone to earth’...



The barracks of the 2nd RE at Saida were of more recent construction than the 1st RE *quartier* at Sidi bel Abbès. Unlike the Quartier Viénot's stiffly French appearance, which made no concessions to the surroundings, the architecture at Saida showed more North African influence, with the walls set back from colonnaded verandas for coolness.



luxury), how to clean and polish their leather gear and weapons (see Plate B), and how to take their turns as daily room orderlies. If they were sensible, they bought their 'Legion daddy' wine in the barracks canteen each evening, and did not neglect the corporal who led their half-squad of about a dozen men. A man naturally had to be able to look out for himself as the ill-assorted group established a natural pecking order, but within those limits few memoirs mention any serious ill-treatment (the most famous exception was a sensational German publication by a man calling himself 'Erwin Rosen'). Having a few francs tucked away was essential if daily life was to be supportable, and although men had nowhere secure to keep their cash or small possessions, personal theft in the barrack room traditionally earned such savage collective beatings that it was very rare. On the other hand, the careless or lazy were constantly 'liberating' each other's items of equipment in order to pass the regular room inspections, and the unwary were considered fair game.

The daily routine began at 5.30am, when the men held out their tin mugs as the day's orderly brought round a jug of '*jus*' – sugared black coffee. 'Reveille' was sounded a few moments later, and they had only 15 minutes to get ready for 'Fall In', rushing to fold away their bedding, sweep the floor, and pull on their fatigues and boots before clattering down to the barrack square. The first training session lasted from 6.30am until 8am, when they were dismissed to wash themselves and to prepare their kit – if they could avoid the NCOs lurking around to make up fatigue parties of defaulters.

The first meal (*soupe*) was at 9.30am; this was fetched from the cookhouse by the day's orderlies, and was eaten in the barrack room. It was always a thick stew of meat with potatoes and other vegetables, rice or macaroni, plus plenty of fresh bread, and a daily ration of a half-litre of red wine; roommates also pooled their cash to buy extras like salad or cheese. (Daily ration scales were generous; each man was entitled to 300g (10oz) of meat, 750g (1.5lb) of bread, plus 21g (0.75oz) of coffee and 16g (0.6oz) of sugar.) The meal was followed at 10am by 'Report', the daily orders parade; training then resumed from 10.30am to 4pm, with five-minute breaks every hour.

Corporals did most of the instructing, working up from ‘physical jerks’ and basic foot drill to rifle drill, using the simple methods of demonstration and repetition inevitable in a force composed of men speaking many languages. German was the Legion’s second tongue; corporals always used both French and German, and had enough smatterings of most other European languages to make the lessons understandable. All légionnaires were expected to learn a very basic sort of French quickly, and most managed this within a few months. Drill alternated with gymnastics, running, swimming and bayonet fencing, but also with lectures and instruction from manuals. The second *soupe* was at 4.30pm; then the recruits cleaned their uniforms and kit for the next day, and – if they had the time and funds – headed for the ‘wet’ canteen, or out on the town. ‘Retreat’ was sounded at 8.45pm, evening rollcall was at 9pm, and ‘Lights Out’ at 10pm.

Marching, shooting and manoeuvring

Trainees made a route march every Wednesday, whatever the weather. At first they marched 20km (12.5 miles) in rifle equipment only, but they worked up steadily to 45km (28 miles) in ten hours in full marching order, with ten-minute halts every hour and an hour’s halt for the morning meal. Their loads weighed at least 22kg (50lb – on campaign it could reach 80lb): a full knapsack with spare clothing, bivouac kit including tent-sections and squad cooking gear, full canteens, rations for two days, and 120 rounds in their pouches. This was an ordeal for fat or (more likely) physically weak men; some had to be discharged as hopelessly unfit, but those who grew strong enough to pass into a rifle company came to take pride in the Legion’s traditional endurance of long marches. The other essential was shooting, and every Friday afternoon was spent on the range. Marksmanship qualifications brought a bugle-horn badge in three classes, and skill was encouraged by competitions, with prizes such as silver watches.

This postcard sent in 1910 shows a Line infantry barrack room in France rather than one at Sidi bel Abbès or Saida, but the general layout and furnishings were universal – see Plate B.



Marching, shooting and managing the bivouac gear for overnight camps were the main skills demanded of a légionnaire, and only basic tactical movements were taught. In the 1890s infantry still manoeuvred and fought *en masse*; they moved in column by twos or fours, shaking out into a single close rank or a more extended skirmishing line to fire standing, kneeling or prone, and to charge with the bayonet. The men were also taught to form squares for open-country fighting – company and battalion squares for defence, and big multi-unit squares for movement, with the supply train, ambulances and artillery in the centre. Fire and movement were controlled by the orders of company captains, half-company and platoon lieutenants, squad sergeants, or (if isolated) half-squad corporals. Since the rifle company had only three officers, and a degree of dispersal was common during wilderness campaigns, some tactical initiative was demanded of sergeants, who had a higher status than in the British Army.

The duration of basic training varied, depending upon aptitude and previous military experience, but promising men would be earmarked for a corporal's course very quickly. For example, Frederic Martyn got his two red stripes after less than three months, but slower learners did not even 'pass off the square' for four months. They then transferred into a rifle company of a battalion, where they would spend the rest of their service. New arrivals were usually 'taken under the wing' of a more experienced fellow-countryman in their squad until they could fend for themselves.

APPEARANCE

Dress, equipment and weapons

Everyday barracks dress in temperate weather was a red-and-blue képi, a blue wool stable-jacket and red trousers; in hot weather it was a suit of coarse white linen fatigues, worn with a broad sky-blue waist sash. Parade dress was a wool tunic, worn with either the red or the white trousers (see Plate A). The white fatigues doubled as field dress, worn under the greatcoat (see Plate F). On the march the képi was usually worn with its iconic white, sun-flapped cover, though from 1900 a white pith helmet – as also worn in the tropics, sometimes with a khaki cover – supplemented this for units in the Sud-Oranais. The Legion copied the Troupes de Marine's khaki tropical field uniforms in Tonkin (see Plate G), and later, from about 1908, in Morocco (see Plate H).



BASIC TRAINING, 1890s

(1) A corporal (here walking backwards) teaches basic marching drill on the parade square of the Quartier Viénot.

(2) Recruits on the rifle range, being instructed by a sergeant in firing '*à la tirailleur*' – prone in a skirmishing line, using their knapsacks as rifle-rests and rudimentary protection.

(3) Recruits on a Wednesday route march, after several weeks' training and now wearing full packs with bivouac gear and tools. Légionnaire Martyn wrote that the long blue sash, wound broad and tight, gave good back support. Photos suggest that there was no standard rule about the use, or not, of the white campaign képi-cover during training; if it was worn with a '*couvre-nuque*' rear sun-flap, this was tucked up inside. This is a company in column-of-fours, supervised by a warrant officer (*adjudant*). The officer in the background is merely out riding for pleasure – officers played very little direct part in training. Contrary to folklore, it was most unusual for stragglers to be left behind; their kit was usually divided between their mates, and they were dragged along somehow. When in the field, one of the company officers usually rode at the tail of the column to sweep up anyone who fell behind, and it was not unknown for them to give a ride to a man who was in a really bad way.



1



3



2

Basic belt order was in black leather with brass fittings: the waistbelt, supported from c.1900 by Y-straps, carried three cartridge pouches and the bayonet-scabbard. Light field equipment was a water canteen and a haversack for daily rations (see Plate H). For full marching order a wood-framed, proofed-canvas knapsack was added, with a heavy load of spare clothing and boots, extra ammunition, emergency rations, eating and washing kit, a blanket, and a tent-section with pole, cord and pegs, often topped off with a bundle of firewood. Squad cooking dishes, water cans

12

Enregistrement successif

DÉSIGNATION DES EFFETS.	EFFETS DISTRIBUÉS à la mobilisation.	ANNÉES ET MOIS			
		1903		1904	
		Collection n°	Collection n°	2.	3.
<i>Habilleinent.</i>					
Capote, manteau, capote-manteau.....					
Collet à capuchon.....					
Gilet.....	{ de sous-officier..... de soldat.....				
Guêtres-jambières en drap (Paires de)...					
Pantalon { de sous-officier..... d'ordonnance de soldat.....					
Pantalon { de sous-officier..... de cheval de soldat.....					
Portemanteau.....					
Tunique { de sous-officier..... ou dolman de soldat.....					
Veste { de sous-officier..... en drap de soldat.....					
<i>Pattes d'épaules</i>					
<i>Coiffure.</i>					
Képi { de sous-officier..... de 1 ^{re} tenue de soldat.....					
Képi { de sous-officier..... de 2 ^e tenue de soldat.....					
Casque.....					
Casquette.....					
Shako.....					
<i>Bonnet de police</i>					
<i>Chaussure.</i>					
Bottes (Paires de).....					
Bottines (Paires de).....					
Brodequins (Paires de).....					
Guêtres de cuir (Paires de).....					
Souliers (Paires de).....					

REMARQUE. Les militaires de l'armée active auxquels des effets sont livrés en moment de leur passage dans leurs unités doivent les entretenir soigneusement. Ils doivent arriver à leur corps "porteurs" de ces effets pour les périodes prescrites de position.

Pages 12–15 in a légionnaire's *livret individuel* or paybook list the major items of clothing and equipment issued – 'effets de la 1^{re} portion'. Page 12 shows that in 1903 Private 2nd Class Seewald drew from stores, among other items, a greatcoat, a pair of red trousers, a stable-jacket, a pair of roll-up shoulder straps for the greatcoat (*pattes d'épaules*, written into the list by hand), a képi, a fatigue sidecap (*bonnet de police*, also hand-written – it had become an issue item since the paybook format was last revised), a pair of ankle boots and a pair of low shoes.

and canvas buckets were divided up and strapped to the packs of every eighth or tenth man, and about 40 men per company also carried small camping tools (see Plate C3). In the sweltering climates of Tonkin, Dahomey and Madagascar efforts were made – not always successfully – to provide the troops with native porters to carry their marching packs. If this was impossible, the men's load was sometimes lightened to a horse-shoe roll wrapped in the tent-section, with the rest carried on pack-animals.

14			
Enregistrement successif des effets de la			
DÉSIGNATION DES EFFETS ET DES ARMES.	ANNÉES ET MOIS		
Grand équipement.	1893 15		
Banderole { de porte-giberne			
Bretelle de fusil, de carab. ou de mousq.	B		
Cartouchières	000		
Ceinturon <i>complet</i>	B		
Courroie de ceinture de revolver			
Étui de revolver			
Giberne	3		
Havresac			
Lanière de revolver			
Poche à cartouches	B		
Porte-épée-baïonnette	B		
Porte-fourreau <i>bretelles de suspension</i>	B		
Campement.			
Couverture	Une		
Fanion de signaleur			
Lanterne de signaleur			
Petit bidon { de 1 litre	B		
(avec courroie) { de 2 litres	Une		
Sac tente-abri avec accessoires			
Armement.	Numéros.	Lettre de série.	Numéros.
Cuirasse			
Épée			
Fusil, carabine ou mousqueton	43929	33	
Jeu d'accessoires complet			
Nécessaire d'armes isolé			
Revolver			
Sabre			
Sabre-baïonnette (série Z)			

On page 14 of Seewald's paybook we find his initial issue of a rifle-sling, three ammo pouches, a 'complete' belt, a knapsack, a bayonet-frog, Y-straps (*bretelles de suspension*, again hand-written into the list), a camping blanket, a 2-litre canteen, and a bivouac tent with accessories. Under 'Armement' at the bottom is listed rifle No. 43929.

The personal weapon until about 1892–95 was the M1874 Gras rifle, an 11mm bolt-action, single-shot piece modified from the old Chassepot so as to take a brass cartridge. The Gras kicked like a carthorse, and its big black-powder round spewed out a blinding, telltale cloud of dirty white smoke. However, in practised hands it was accurate over a good range, a man-stopper, and extremely robust. With repeated firing the black powder fouled the chamber, but if even a muddy puddle was available the soldier could simply take out the bolt and wash it. With the strong, T-section bayonet fixed it was about 1.9m (6ft. 3in.) long, giving a good reach for hand-to-hand fighting, even against horsemen.

Legion units in Tonkin began to receive the new M1888 Lebel 8mm repeater in 1892, but the marching battalion shipped to Madagascar in 1895 was the first complete unit to be issued with it. The Lebel took nine ‘smokeless-powder’ rounds in a tubular magazine under the barrel; early production rifles had various faults, but these were largely eliminated with the M1888/93 model (though not those of its needle-bayonet, which bent too easily). The more rapid ignition of the nitrocellulose propellant gave it a sharper kick than the Gras, but it was longer-ranged, more accurate and more penetrating. It could be fired from cover without giving away the firer’s position, and in defensive emergencies it had the priceless advantage of delivering rapid magazine fire.

LIFE IN PEACETIME

The French Army’s standard ‘training year’ applied to peacetime service in North Africa – the progression from individual drill led by corporals, to squad drill led by sergeants, to company and battalion drill led by officers, to company and battalion field exercises, finally culminating in regimental, brigade and/or divisional manoeuvres in the late summer. As an integrated component of the North African army corps, the Legion (1895–1911, 3rd Brigade, thereafter 2nd Brigade, in Oran Division) played its full part in this calendar. Units were subject to frequent inspections by regimental officers, and reviews by generals. George Manington recalled the excitement and satisfaction of taking part in a general inspection parade of the 3,000-strong 1st RE before the commanding general of XIX Army Corps, when the final march past was headed by the regiment’s magnificent band and the pioneer squad with their polished axes:

The Legion presents a pleasing sight to a soldier’s eyes, as with bayonets fixed the men swing by, each battalion, company, and file at its proper distance. The tramp of feet resounds with clockwork regularity, in union with the musical rhythm of the band, and the blare of the bugles crashing out the regimental march with its rattling chorus... No other regiment in France can approach the Legion for smartness at drill and on parades. The men are proud of the reputation, and make every effort to maintain it.¹

1. The Legion march was – as it still is – ‘*Le Boudin*’. The rhythm is stirring, but the words are a cheerful nonsense: roughly, ‘Look, here comes the sausage, for the Swiss, the Alsatians and the Lorrainers. There’s none for the Belgians, because they s**t instead of shooting.’ This monstrous libel on Belgian légionnaires is believed to date from the Franco-Prussian War, 1870–71, when neutral Belgium requested the French government not to deploy Belgian légionnaires against German troops. Incidentally, the Legion’s ‘traditional’ slow marching cadence actually dates only from the mid-20th century.



The légionnaire was required to be clean and neat at all times, and immaculate when in formal uniform. This was not made easy for him; the Legion's unofficial motto was 'You're a légionnaire – Sort it out for yourself!' (*Légionnaire? Alors, démerde-toi!*). Keeping his uniforms and kit brushed and polished during a demanding daily schedule took painstaking care. Inevitably, the soldier was also subject to frequent barracks fatigues – the workaday chores or *corvées* that made up a constant round of sweeping, fetching, carrying, cleaning and repairing, digging, building and painting. The first call for such duties fell on the defaulters who had fallen foul of their sergeant by committing petty misdemeanours, but any apparently underemployed man spotted around the barracks was liable to be grabbed. Légionnaires grew ingenious at faking minor illnesses to get a chit from the medical officer excusing them from onerous duties, but detected malingerers naturally earned confinement to barracks and extra fatigues.

Pay, and off-duty hours

The légionnaire received his derisory wages on two paydayes at the beginning and middle of each month. Basic daily pay in Algeria for a *soldat de 2e classe* was 5 centimes – one-twentieth part of a franc. (Over the period 1890–1910 this was equivalent to something between a British penny and a halfpenny; i.e., between $\frac{1}{12}$ th and $\frac{1}{24}$ th of the contemporary British Tommy's daily pay of a shilling – 12 pence.) Promotion to private 1st class doubled it to 10 centimes, and a private who re-enlisted went up to 12 centimes daily. A corporal earned just 20 centimes a day – a *sou*, in the slang term. Eventual promotion to sergeant made a big difference, bringing at least 9 francs per month – six times a private's rate.

This group posed outside one of the gate guardhouses at the Quartier Viénot in 1913 supposedly shows the duty guard eating their morning meal. The senior NCO (just visible, cut by left edge of photo), and the two cookhouse orderlies with him, wear whites – note the depth of the sky-blue sash. The enlisted men all wear white-covered képis, but sun-flaps were strictly a campaign item, by now usually worn only in the Sud-Oranais. The 1897 tunic with epaulettes is worn with white fatigue trousers, ankle boots, and belt order with Y-straps, but not the sash. Orders of the day specified the particular uniform to be worn for formal duties and walking-out – whether *veste*, tunic, or greatcoat, and red or white trousers. A high degree of smartness was always demanded, and men could only leave barracks after passing a searching inspection by the sergeant of the guard.



The recreation room at Saida, peopled for the photographer by rather unrelaxed-looking légionnaires – playing cards (though gambling for money was strictly forbidden), chess and other board-games, drinking coffee, listening to gramophone records, and generally trying to give an impression of peaceful leisure. They wear a motley collection of barracks dress: white fatigues, khaki jackets, blue stable-jackets, and the buttoned white jackets authorized for sergeants and corporals in 1897. Note that the nearest man at right, wearing a khaki jacket with the single stripe of a private first class, wears canvas and rubber *espadrilles*; these are also seen in some photos of troops camping in the field.

For privates this pocket money hardly stretched beyond small necessities like soap, polish and bootlaces, and it is clear that most men had other ways of getting cash for drink and tobacco. Some found part-time work in town to supplement their military wages. Others had brought with them on enlistment amounts that were modest enough in civilian life but riches in the Legion; for instance, Léon Silbermann had 60 francs in his purse when he joined up – more than three years' pay for a private 2nd class. Nor were all légionnaires penniless outcasts; some men received money from home, and banked it within reach. For the majority, however, every penny counted, and to fund their thirst drunkards habitually sold items of rations, clothing or kit in the alleys of Sidi bel Abbès and Saida (thus the constant lifting of other men's kit in barracks, and the constant traffic through the cells).

Soldiers had little to do in the free evening hours but to go for a drink; there was a culture of hard boozing by all ranks, and the canteen wine was cheap. Alcohol was the légionnaire's great solace and great curse, responsible for almost all the misdemeanours that earned him the repeated award of eight days' cells. If men had a little extra cash and were not on the defaulters' list they could spend the evening in town. No respectable woman of the mainly Spanish *colon* (settler) population would dream of being seen in public with a légionnaire, and the soldier seeking white women of negotiable affection was limited by his poverty to a fairly grim level of female companionship. Visiting the Arab brothel-shacks in the *village nègre* was both strictly forbidden and dangerous, and a sergeant's guard was posted at the bridge over the creek outside the walls of Sidi bel Abbès that led to these dark and perilous alleys.

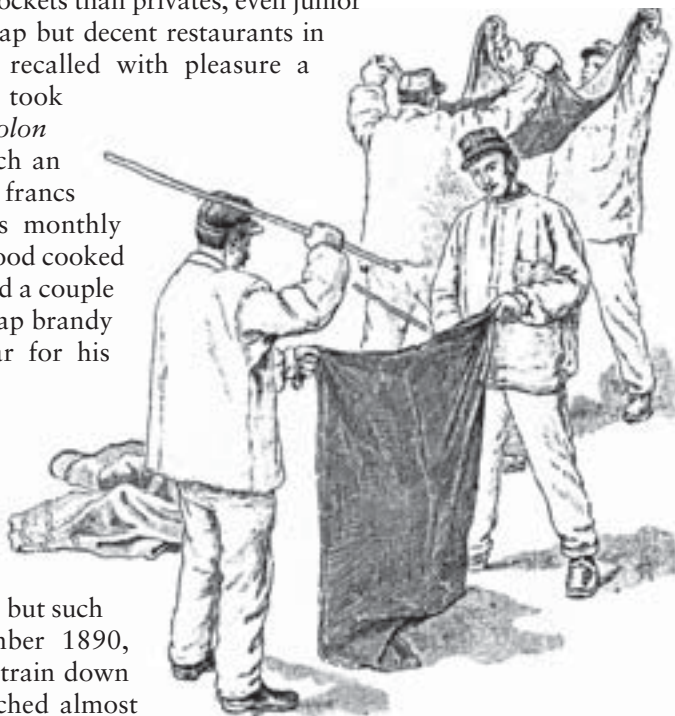


A rather more realistic impression of how French soldiers spent much of their time in barracks; a corporal – note the two sleeve stripes on his *veste* – relaxes while privates perform some of the endless *corvées*. Sweeping up, and shaking out the bedding, were merely boring; cookhouse fatigues obviously had their compensations; but somebody also had to empty the latrine buckets...

By contrast, on their free Sundays men might stroll out of town into the pleasant countryside, to chat, smoke and doze with their mates in the shade of trees. With a few more coins in their pockets than privates, even junior NCOs could occasionally patronize cheap but decent restaurants in town or beyond. Corporal Pfirmann recalled with pleasure a monthly treat, when he and a comrade took their carefully saved-up pay out to the *colon* village of Sidi Lhasen for lunch at such an establishment, Chez Philippe. For 1.80 francs each (nearly one-third of a corporal's monthly wages) they could enjoy an absinthe, a good cooked meal accompanied by plenty of bread and a couple of glasses of wine, and coffee with a cheap brandy – *le patron* also threw in a free cigar for his regulars.

Manoeuvres and hard labour

Battalions were periodically sent on manoeuvres in the desert of the Sud-Oranais, or for spells of labouring in distant posts on the high plains. The break in monotony was at first welcome, but such missions were no holiday. In September 1890, Manington's III/1st RE were carried by train down to the railhead at Mécheria, then marched almost





An Army barracks canteen, where the men could spend their evening hours drinking for prices lower than those charged by bars in the town. The basic pay for a Legion private second class was 5 centimes per day, and for a private first class, 10 centimes. A litre of canteen wine cost 5 centimes, a quarter-litre of the roughest *bapedi* fig spirit 10 centimes, and a shot of absinthe 30 or 40 centimes. Since many soldiers aimed to drink several bottles of wine in an evening (a 'real légionnaire' would boast that he could dispose of six), and most smoked, the basic pay could never stretch far enough. The impecunious routinely earned an extra 5 centimes a day from a more fortunate comrade for cleaning his kit and taking his turn as room orderly.

160km (100 miles) south-west, into the Saharan Atlas beyond Ain Sefra. After ten days in the desert the unit was swept by an outbreak of typhoid; this was potentially fatal, and the delirious Manington was lucky to survive many days being jolted about in camel- and mule-litters.

Silbermann of 2nd RE described a five-day, 240km (150-mile) march from Saida down to the post at Géryville, across rolling, treeless plains covered with esparto grass. The wells were far apart, and the water was bad; most days and nights the men had to get by on the 2 litres in their canteens, and the 15 litres each squad was allowed for cooking, from the reserve kegs carried on each company's three baggage camels. Men had to pour a contribution from their canteens into the camp-kettle to make the morning coffee – no water, no coffee. There was no firewood on the steppes, so campfires were made with thorn-scrub and the dried camel dung that littered the tracks. The food was bulky enough, but dull – for instance, rice with *lardons* of fat pork. After a couple of days the men were well into their rhythm and accustomed to the weight of their packs; with their officers riding ahead and behind, they marched at ease – rifles slung, smoking their pipes, and sometimes singing or humming popular songs. Throughout the march Silbermann saw only one other human being – an unsmiling Spanish rancher, pistol at hip, who rode past without a word. The Army was not popular with the settlers.

Géryville was a wretched posting – chilling in winter (the légionnaires called it 'Géléville', 'Frozentown', and it was notoriously short of firewood). It was baking in summer, and choking and stinging under days-long sandstorms when the maddeningly hot sirocco wind blew from the Sahara. This dreary one-street village of low, dirty, flea-infested mud-brick houses and shacks was populated by a few hundred Spanish settlers and Arabs, and

dominated by two forbidding one-company stone barrack blocks. Its only bar was an uninviting single-storey 'Hôtel du Sahara' (whose evening excitements bore not the faintest resemblance to Hollywood fantasies). Silbermann's mornings were spent in field exercises, his afternoons in labouring to demolish the old barracks for rebuilding. The men killed time on their free Sundays by mooching around the hills hunting vultures and jackals, which earned a tiny bounty. It was after long months in posts like this, crushed by absolute monotony, that men were driven by depression – '*le cafard*' – to sudden drunken violence, self-harm, madcap exploits, or hopeless attempts at desertion simply to relieve their boredom. The Legion learned to be indulgent, and punishments were not harsh for those who straggled back sheepishly, or were brought in by the native mounted police, within a few days. (Repeated desertion, or deserting with a weapon, was treated a great deal more seriously. Silbermann recounted the public execution of two German deserters who turned bandit and murdered local Arabs.)

From G ryville, Silbermann's platoon was sent to dig wells along the track to Aflou, living under canvas. Although they dug deep and often, only three attempts yielded water during two-and-a-half months of sweltering work. Hardly had they returned to G ryville when the battalion were sent south on brigade manoeuvres; then they were marched north for 13 days, to the post at Tiaret. The weather turned bad, and for days on end rain lashed across the prairie in the teeth of an icy wind. At night it was sometimes impossible to cook hot food, and the wind blew apart the six-man bivouac tents (made by buttoning together the men's individual sections). Often the l gionnaires were unable to sleep despite their exhaustion, lying shivering on the wet, stony ground wrapped in their greatcoats and single blankets.

On campaign every Legion column was accompanied by some of these *goumiers* – Arab irregular horsemen, hired for a season to scout for the Army in return for a rifle, ammunition, and the chance to do a little looting. Very similar in appearance were the more permanently employed native mounted policemen (*moghaznis*) who were sent out to search for Legion deserters, and usually caught them. Desertion attempts were more often a gesture of defiance, fuelled by alcohol or intolerable boredom, than carefully thought-through plans to actually get clear of French territory. Unless a man was stupid enough to take his rifle with him he did not face very harsh punishment when he was brought back, or – as many did – turned himself in after a few days, when the novelty wore off and he got hungry.





'The events on the Algero-Moroccan frontier – a detachment of the 1st RE in the courtyard of the barracks before their departure.' This photo of a company in full field marching order dates from the early 1900s; the fact that they wear neither sun-flaps on the képi-covers nor pith helmets suggests that they are headed for the northern Oujda/Moulouya River front rather than for the Sud-Oranais. (Postcard by Boumendil, Sidi bel Abbès, courtesy Jacques Gandini)

OPPOSITE

'Hesseling, German, 1st RE; 12 years' service, 16 campaigns'. For both manoeuvres in the south and detached service in small posts légionnaires wore full field marching order; the leather gaiters date this photo to some time after 1903. By the time Légionnaire Hesseling takes his final discharge in three years' time the number of Germans in the Legion will be dropping markedly, with damaging consequences. Hesseling would certainly be wearing campaign medals, but his very full beard hides them. Such extravagant facial hair was a fashion among old soldiers, as were tattoos – both were a way of expressing some individuality.

Over his five-year hitch, a légionnaire spent at least as much time performing more or less back-breaking physical labour as he did on conventional military duties. Like the Roman legionary of old, he was simply a pair of hands that the government employed as it thought fit, and in pacified Algeria that meant building the infrastructure of 'France overseas'.

Discipline

Sergeants could award punishments at their own initiative, although they had to be endorsed by an officer. In barracks the légionnaire only risked the same scale of punishments as any other French soldier, but these were awarded more freely. They began with confinement to barracks and extra fatigues. The next step was *salle de police* – normal daily duties, but spending the nights in full kit on a plank platform in the guardhouse. 'Ordinary' arrest was a good deal harsher: at least eight days and nights in a bare cell, with six hours' exhausting punishment drill daily. (A common award was '40, of which eight' – 40 days' confinement to barracks and fatigues, of which eight days were spent under arrest.) *Cellule* was even worse: solitary confinement day and night in a dark cell on punishment rations, for up to a month at a time.

Above this level, unit commanders could sentence serious or persistent offenders to six months in a disciplinary platoon, and this could be extended – the slightest misdemeanour during the sentence turned the clock back to the beginning again. Based in remote tented camps, the *disciplinaires* were employed as pioneer gangs to build roads and caravanserais, and when there was no useful military task for them to perform they were simply set to stone-breaking under the desert sun. The NCOs or warrant officers who sometimes commanded detached gangs or camps were inadequately supervised, and cruel field punishments might be inflicted. *Le tombeau* meant spending all day in an open grave without shade or water; *cellule* in a one-man bivouac tent was not much better; and – worst of all – the crippling *crapaudine* ('the toad') meant agonizing hours in the sun with the wrists and ankles tied together in the small of the back. Martyn only saw this inflicted once, when on campaign in Dahomey in 1892, as an alternative to the firing squad for a

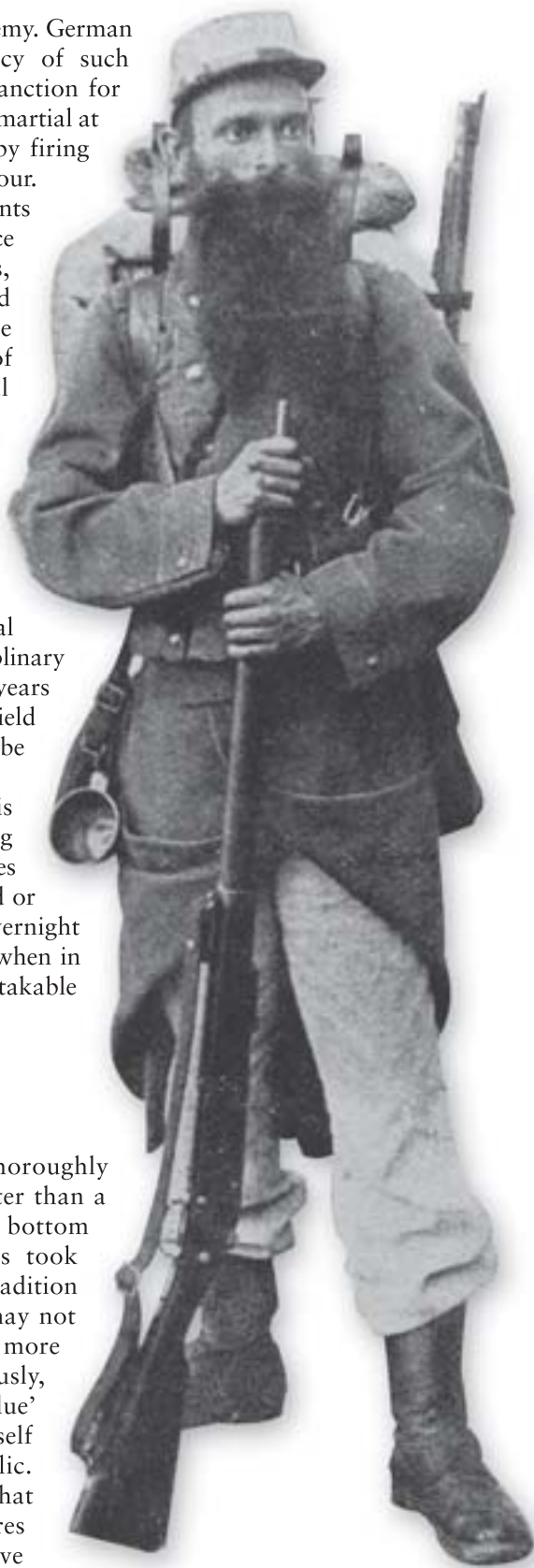
man who struck an NCO in the presence of the enemy. German propaganda probably exaggerated the frequency of such barbarities, but they did happen. The ultimate sanction for really serious crimes was a divisional general court martial at Oran, where a guilty verdict could bring death by firing squad or many years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Between 1906 and 1911, while French enlistments were steadily overtaking the former preponderance of Alsatians and Germans (see above, 'Class, nationality and age'), French governments pursued policies that severely damaged morale and discipline in the Armée Métropolitaine – to the extent of provoking many officer resignations and actual conscript mutinies in several home garrisons. The legal criteria that had condemned men to service only in the penal Bats d'Af were relaxed; the Troupes Coloniales refused to accept the worst material, and some very hard cases indeed eventually worked their way through into the Legion – which dealt with them in the only ways it could. (Remarkably, before 1906 there was no legal means of discharging a légionnaire for purely disciplinary reasons.) Some of the worst French dregs of these years were stupid, predatory brutes, and tales of savage field punishments in the *compagnie disciplinaire* should be read against that background.

Overall, however, it must be stressed that it is simply impossible to get men to fight well by turning them into brutalized 'slave soldiers'. The légionnaires were always hard to handle when they were bored or drunk; but their behaviour always improved overnight when there was a prospect of active service, and when in the field they consistently fought well – an unmistakable testament to the Legion's generally high morale.

BELIEF AND BELONGING

The Armée Métropolitaine regarded the thoroughly unfashionable Legion with disdain, as little better than a labour corps, which had always been near the bottom of the military 'food chain'. The légionnaires took a perverse pride in this, and in their consequent tradition of self-reliance, scrounging and initiative: 'We may not be rich or pretty – but we can fight harder, steal more cleverly, and look after ourselves better.' Obviously, this multinational mercenary corps lacked the 'glue' of simple patriotism – but for most the Legion itself was the focus of loyalty, not the French Republic. (The reality of that loyalty is proved by the fact that in 1914 a fair number of German-born légionnaires who had been granted French citizenship after five



years' service – like Sgt. Max Mader – chose to fight on the Western Front, although they could have opted to stay in Morocco.) As in all armies, *esprit de corps* was based on a man's loyalty to his immediate comrades, and thus by extension to his company and battalion. However, the Legion also had a proud collective sense of its special identity; the légionnaires believed themselves – correctly – to be superior as fighting men to the inexperienced conscripts of the line, and enjoyed a fierce rivalry with the Troupes Coloniales who shared their overseas campaigns. A Colonial officer grudgingly wrote of légionnaires of 2nd RE at Fez in 1911 that:

D

MOUNTED COMPANIES IN THE SUD-ORANAIS, c.1900–07

The usual tactical unit of '*la Montée*' was the *peloton* or half-company, comprising just over 100 men in two large platoons (*sections*) of about 50 under an officer; each platoon was made up of two large squads (*groupes*) of about 25, under a sergeant and two corporals. Since the Legion company had only three officers, the two platoons of a half-company in the field were led by either the captain company commander and one of his two lieutenants, or a lieutenant and a warrant officer (*adjudant*). The *peloton* typically had about 65 mules: one for every two rankers, one each for the warrant officer, sergeant-major and QM-sergeant, and a few extra to carry supplies and baggage and to provide remounts as necessary. The usual formation was as follows:

- (1) Normally, a few Arab *goumiers* irregulars or, if available, regular Spahi troopers would form a small advance guard on the march, scouting well ahead for any sign of trouble or for the next waterhole. (They would be much further ahead than shown here.)
- (2) The commander, often with his orderly mounted on his spare charger, led the march.
- (3) The column-of-march might form single file; double files – as here; or ride in two parallel platoons each in double files. The marching soldier of each mule-pair usually marched on the right of his mate, but when moving in two or four files the marching men would be on the outside flanks. If the mules were kicking up a lot of dust they left a slight gap, but they always had to be ready to change places smartly every hour, and as marches started in the pre-dawn darkness a man on foot who straggled also risked getting left behind. At need, all the marching men might be called forward together to form a skirmish line, for instance to clear a crest or reconnoitre a defile. When the company marched past in review the marchers formed up together in the lead, followed by the riders in double file.
- (4) When double files were adopted, the small headquarters group, led by the sergeant-major and including packmules with immediate-use spare ammunition and water, rode between the files; the QM-sergeant was in charge of the rest of the small pack train, which followed.

Defensive square

At the first sign of trouble the half-company would dismount, most forming skirmish lines on one or more fronts to protect the mule-holders. If serious attack was anticipated they would form a square or diamond, preferably on any available higher ground.

- (5) Each of the four squads formed one face of the square/diamond formation, which was naturally distorted to some extent by the topography of the ground on which they were obliged to fight. (6) The two platoon commanders, attended by their orderlies, each took position in an angle of two squads, normally remaining mounted so that they could observe and control the fire. (7) One man in every eight acted as the mule-holder for four beasts.
- (8) The headquarters group, with the ammunition and water mules, stayed within easy earshot of the commanding officer. (9) The remaining packmules were held in the centre.

Inset 1 Part of the headquarters group – a warrant officer, bugler, and standard-bearer. Normally a mounted company would have a small square flag (*fanion*) – see page 35 – and each platoon a triangular pennant, but in 1904 this non-regulation tricolour-dyed horsetail was seen carried by a 1st RE mounted company at Mechéria.

Inset 2 Mules were normally good-tempered, but when under fire they could become difficult to manage. In all, the need for mule-holders reduced a half-company's firing strength by about 16–20 rifles – nearly 20 per cent.



These brave soldiers give us excellent service. Without sharing the snobbery of those who consider [the Legion] the indisputable elite of the French Army, any impartial observer must recognize that they are... the most precious element of the troops from Algeria. They have an immense *esprit-de-corps*, and the universal handiness of men who have seen and remembered much.... The soldiers go quietly about their... activities, waiting for the return of days of glory, when [they] will take up their rifles again and go looking – in a ravine, beyond a stream, at the foot of a wall – for the bullet that will end their obscure and changeable existence.

This pride was actively encouraged. The *salle d'honneur* or regimental museum in the Viénot Barracks at Sidi bel Abbès was a particularly impressive shrine to ancestor-worship. Soon after their arrival new légionnaires were given a conducted tour of its relics and battle-paintings by an officer, who recounted the stories of these heroes and battle honours in inspiring terms. The British Army veteran Frederic Martyn was 'profoundly impressed by what I had seen, and I think that I was a much more valuable asset to France when I came out than when I went in'. From the recruits' first induction the Legion preached its tradition: to fulfil the given mission, unto death, whatever the hardships and without thought of surrender. The ethos of 'the last cartridge' was strongly reinforced by the fact – also hammered home to recruits – that any légionnaire who allowed himself to be captured alive by native enemies could expect a grisly death. It was an article of faith that the wounded were always to be recovered from the field, and (if at all possible) the dead as well, to prevent their mutilation or mocking display by the enemy.

The officers

While the men's relationship with their officers was always stiff enough to preserve the latter's absolute authority, when battalions marched out on campaign that relationship differed from what was normal in the Line. The reason officers had chosen to serve with the unfashionable Legion – exiled to punishing and unhealthy climates, far from the off-duty pleasures, the gossip and the career-building of

The focus of *esprit de corps* – the regimental flag of the 1st RE, photographed in April 1906 when its *cravate* was decorated with the Cross of the Legion of Honour. The gold-fringed silk tricolour bore on the obverse the legend 'RÉPUBLIQUE FRANCAISE/ LÉGION ÉTRANGÈRE'; and on the reverse (illustrated), 'VALEUR/ ET/ DISCIPLINE' and the representative battle honours 'SÉBASTOPOL/ KABYLIE/ MAGENTA/ CAMERONE/ EXTRÊME-ORIENT'. The words 'Valour and Discipline' set the Legion's flags apart from those of the French Line, which bore 'Honour and Fatherland'. The colour party wear tunics, red trousers and belt order, but note also (left) the water canteen and knapsack; many photos show packs worn during ceremonial parades, emphasizing the Legion's pride in its reputation for tireless marching. The lieutenant (right) wears many decorations and is clearly middle-aged, suggesting a former NCO who has climbed from the ranks via the Saint-Maixent infantry academy.



France – was that they craved the experience of active service that the Armée Métropolitaine could not offer. If they proved unequal to the challenges, they generally did not last long; but those who did thrive on the shared dangers and looser reins of distant and sometimes independent commands soon learned that ‘the Legion is different’. The rigid formalities and petty regulations of the Armée Métropolitaine were impossible to maintain in a hostile wilderness where every man’s life depended on his fellow soldiers. Company officers came to know far more about the characters of their long-service professionals than they ever had about the constantly rotating intakes of Metropolitan conscripts at home. The best of them learned that effective man-management required much more than the blind application of harsh discipline, and seasoned officers often relaxed into a tough paternalism, choosing to stay with the Legion for the rest of their careers. A fair number of them, after all, were ex-rankers themselves.²

Memoirs reveal that the rankers took pride in their own officers, boasting that their captain was the bravest, hardest-marching, hardest-drinking (and even – provided he was scrupulously fair – the most eagle-eyed disciplinarian) in the battalion. Their loyalty was often reciprocated; for example, at the turn of the century Capt. Paul Rollet, the long-time commander of a mounted company in the Sud-Oranais and Morocco, twice put his own career in jeopardy by stubborn protests to a commanding general about what he considered to be the over-rigid application of military law to one of his wayward légionnaires. The memoir of Léon Silbermann mentions his surprise, early in his training, at seeing a Legion major sharing a bottle in the depot canteen with his old soldiers. A brave, decisive and fair-minded officer could be sure that if he fell wounded his men would risk their lives to rescue him, or even to bring in his corpse – just as they would for their own comrades. For example, one of his men described Maj. Met of I/1st RE, who was badly wounded and carried in under fire at Sidi Belkasssem in Morocco in June 1914, in these terms:

‘Daddy’ Met was a good légionnaire and we all adored him; an old bugler told me that he had been in the Legion for 23 years, and others told of serving under him in the Sud-Oranais, Madagascar and Tonkin.... He was full of solicitude and experience, kept an eye on everything, and commanded with firmness and kindness.

2. ‘Foreigners’ could not rise through the ranks to become officers, but foreign-born légionnaires who became naturalized Frenchmen in order to obtain promotion to sergeant could hope to follow the Saint-Maixent route. There is also a confusion in the records: the Army had few slots for infantry officers in these years, and French Reserve officers who wished to convert to full-time regular commissions sometimes found a way around the logjam by obtaining a transparently fictitious ‘foreign commission’ (*à titre étranger*). These officers would serve with the Legion for a few years before ‘rectifying’ their national status and transferring to the Line or Colonial troops. Of the 87 ‘foreign commissions’ awarded in 1883–95, 77 in fact went to Frenchmen (one of these was Capt. Borelli, who distinguished himself in the famous siege of Tuyen Quang in 1885).

During the 1890s, foreign policy considerations opened the door for ten Danish and six Swiss officers to obtain direct commissions into the Legion without naturalization; one of the former was Lt. Christian Selchauhansen, killed at El Mounzar in September 1903. Another respected foreign-born officer who obtained a direct commission was a New Zealander, James Wadell, who resigned his commission in the British Army when he married a Frenchwoman during the Boer War. He obtained French citizenship and a *sous-lieutenant’s* commission in the Legion in April 1900. After service in North Africa and Indochina he was highly decorated for gallantry at Gallipoli and on the Western Front during World War I, and finally retired as a lieutenant-colonel in 1926.



The guidon of the Mounted Company, 2nd RE, c.1900. Small blue/white/red *tricolore* in canton; flag halved green over red, with appliqué white cloth grenade with black numeral; black leather hoist edge and laces. Note that at this date the exact shape of the Legion’s seven-flamed grenade was still evolving. (Milassin; drawing by John Richards)

LIFE ON CAMPAIGN

Dahomey and Madagascar, 1890s

Both officers and men had joined up in the hope of active service, whatever its dangers. In fact, by far the greatest of those dangers would prove to be not bullets or blades, but mosquitoes and bacteria.

When the formation of a marching battalion from both REs for a campaign in Dahomey in West Africa (roughly, modern Benin) was announced in July 1892, volunteers of all ranks clamoured to be accepted. As part of Col. Dodds' three-battalion force, alongside Naval infantry and Senegalese *tirailleurs*, on 1 September Maj. Faurax's 800-man Legion battalion marched inland from Porto Novo towards Abomey, the capital of King Behanzin of the warlike Fon tribe. Behanzin had a fierce slave-raiding army of some 5,000 male and female warriors, perhaps 2,000 of them armed with modern rifles including some Winchester and Spencer repeaters.

The direct distance was only about 130km (80 miles), but in the trackless jungle and swamp the only practical route was very indirect, and the column needed thousands of African porters to carry supplies and the soldiers' packs. Its progress was very slow, and Martyn described hacking paths through the bush in staggering heat and humidity amid clouds of biting insects. The troops were dosed with quinine against malaria, but the correct dosage was not then understood, and anyway the column was soon being ravaged by dysentery and yellow fever – 'the black vomit'. The Fon resisted with conspicuous bravery in a series of set-piece actions that forced the French to form square; French volleys always inflicted disproportionate enemy casualties, but never without cost. Early in October the column reached a dryer region of difficult scrub-jungle where clean water was very scarce. The porters had been absconding in great numbers, so the fever-weakened soldiers had to carry their own heavy backpacks. The Dahomeyans' stubborn hit-and-run attacks cost the French perhaps 20 casualties a day, but it was disease that laid most men low. By 7 October combat strength had fallen from c.2,400 to c.1,600 men, and the Navy battalion had virtually

The Legion's companions in many campaigns were the 'turcos' – the regiments of Tirailleurs Algériens. This half-squad in Morocco in the years before the Great War are clothed for campaign in white, apart from the red *chéchia* cap and red waist sash. The 2nd RTA was based at Mostaganem as part of the Oran Division, and its battalions were active in the Sud-Oranais in the early years of the 20th century.





ceased to exist. By the time Dodds reached Abomey after nine weeks' marching and fighting, the Legion battalion had only about 300 men still theoretically fit for duty. In all, their final casualties reached about 75 per cent, mostly from fever.

In 1895 the French government launched an invasion of the huge island of Madagascar, off the east coast of Africa. The ostensible enemy were the 40,000-strong army of the dominant Hova tribe, again with some modern weapons. The 15,400-strong expedition was organized by the Army, which insisted on including four marching battalions of Metropolitan conscripts alongside nine others of Navy, Legion, Algerian and other native infantry. General Duchesne's roughly 480km (300-mile) advance on the capital, Antananarivo, involved landing at Majunga in a low-lying region of swampy jungle; then creating a river supply line, before driving roads for supply carts inland to the foothills of the eastern highlands; and finally climbing escarpments to c.1,500m (5,000ft.) above sea level, and crossing a plateau. In the event, inadequate reconnaissance and the piecemeal arrival of the landing force ruined the planned logistics, and although the advance guard set off on 1 May most of the infantry had to be used to build a long cart-road through the malarial swamp-jungle.

In Madagascar the human resistance was much weaker than in Dahomey, but once again billions of anopheles mosquitoes more than filled the gap. The badly led, untrained and patchily armed Hova conscripts – essentially slaves – repeatedly ran for their lives after exchanging a few shots with the advancing French; but Duchesne's ill-fed battalions continued to dwindle alarmingly, under the relentless tasks of road-building and getting supplies forward. The quinine had been incompetently loaded, so did not reach the field hospitals in time to prevent malaria – and anyway, in Madagascar simple malaria casualties were outstripped by those from the deadlier tertian strain, blackwater fever, for which quinine is useless. The ordeal of this death-march was so harrowing that several légionnaires killed themselves. Reaching the

What appears to be a company of the Legion parading in field marching order (complete with sun-flapped képis) in a tented camp outside Oujda. This town in north-east Morocco, just across the border with Algeria, was occupied by units from Gen. Lyautey's Oran Division, on orders from Paris, in March 1908.

inland escarpments by early September, Gen. Duchesne picked a 'light column' of the fittest men to force-march the last 190km (120 miles). By then sickness had so reduced Maj. Barre's 800-man Legion battalion that even after 150 replacements arrived the unit could muster only 450 rifles. After overcoming weak resistance, the column marched into Antananarivo on 30 September 1895.

It is calculated that of the 18,400 troops who eventually served in this six-month campaign, about 5,700 died – and only 25 of them from enemy action. The overall fatality rate was thus a disastrous 31 per cent of the troops present, but in the unacclimatized Metropolitan battalions it was between 43 and a staggering 63 per cent – at one stage a battalion of the 200th Line was reduced to 58 men. (These shocking figures enraged French public opinion, and ensured that native regiments, selected Navy volunteers, and the Legion would henceforth bear the whole burden of tropical campaigns.) The expedition cost the Legion battalion 226 dead – 22 per cent – of whom only five fell in combat.

The Yen Thé region of North Vietnam, where most of the Legion contingent operated in the early 1890s. (In the later 1890s and 1900s they would be spread along the Chinese frontiers, from Lao Cai in the north-west to Cao Bang and Lang Son in the north-east.) The Bavarian Cpl. Jean Pfirmann served at Bo Ha post in spring 1889; his company were also responsible for providing rotating garrisons at Kep, and Bac Le (just off the map, on the 'Mandarin Road' south-east of Cho Trang). The French 2nd Brigade HQ was at Bac Ninh, and the depot for the Legion battalions at Phu Lang Thuong. The British Cpl. Frederic Martyn fought in the attacks on bandit forts at Cao Thuong in November 1890 and Hue Thué in January 1891. His countryman Pte. George Manington served at Nha Nam post from April 1891, and later at Cho Trang, before being lucky enough to be transferred to a clerk's job in the 2nd Brigade intelligence office at Bac Ninh. (Map by John Richards)



Tonkin, 1890s

Although total Legion combat deaths in this theatre between 1887 and 1909 were only 271, those from disease were ten times higher. This constant toll ensured that the Legion battalions in North Vietnam needed replacement drafts of 25 per cent each year, and even so most companies could muster only about 100 fit men at any one time. There was never any shortage of volunteers, despite the spectacle of those who returned to Algeria with their health wrecked by malaria, blackwater fever, scrub typhus and cholera. For much of the 1880s–90s Tonkin was the only place a légionnaire could earn a medal and the ‘bragging rights’ of a combat veteran. It was a far-off, exotic land of legendary beauty, inhabited by a graceful and polite people whose women were reported to be friendly. This coveted posting was held out as a privilege to well-behaved rankers; in Tonkin, coolies would carry their packs when they were ‘on column’, and colonial double pay would enable them to hire local servants to mend and launder uniforms and do the barrack chores. Whatever the accompanying dangers, many surviving légionnaires were not disappointed by the reality, and remained nostalgic for the Far East for the rest of their lives.

After a five-week voyage, the 500-strong drafts were landed at Haiphong and boated up river to the main depot at Phu Lang Thuong. From there the replacements were dispersed to single companies spread across the Legion’s area of responsibility in the Yen Thé country. Individual platoons were rotated through even smaller posts, each colocated with two platoons of the locally raised Tirailleurs Tonkinois. Their task was to provide local security against the often strong, audacious and well-armed gangs of Chinese bandits and Tonkinese rebels that preyed upon the productive villagers with medieval ferocity.

Tonkin, 1892: légionnaires – probably from II/1st RE – in a forest camp beside a stream. The luxuriance of the jungle in the background emphasizes the difficulty patrols faced in moving across country, and in locating bandit hideouts without being spotted themselves. Most of these soldiers wear whites; only a couple have khaki jackets, and two (behind the sergeant, right centre) have striped French Navy undershirts – much Legion kit in Tonkin was drawn from naval stores. At left foreground are a couple of local men, probably acting as guides; just visible in the shadows around the tripod-shaped bamboo shelter are some dark-uniformed Tirailleurs Tonkinois. This photo was taken near the notoriously unhealthy Cho Trang post, where George Manington and most of his platoon went down with blackwater fever. (Jean Vigne)



The normal operations were local patrols or escorts for supply columns, with occasional attempts to ambush the brigands on the move or catch them inside a village; these attempts were usually in vain, since the ‘pirates’ had much better local intelligence than the French. Occasionally a bandit fort would be located, and a larger column would be assembled with difficulty, to slog slowly and noisily up into the forested hills, hampered by artillery and the necessary supply train of porters. Unsurprisingly, the enemy had usually shifted to another hideout long before the French arrived. Such operations were attempted even during the summer season of monsoon rains, which made cross-country movement miserably difficult.

The légionnaires initially had to build their own posts – from mud bricks and bamboo – but once these were established daily life was generally not unpleasant. Everywhere they served, the Legion had a tradition of efficient and self-reliant domesticity; one Colonial officer in Morocco would write that: ‘In a short time any Legion detachment left to itself... will make a rural home spring from the earth, comfortable and well run.... The kitchen garden takes up considerable space; and a flock of livestock is assembled with care... because a varied diet is the best protection for European troops in exotic countries.’

There was always a small village with a market outside the fort, to house the families and serve the needs of the Tirailleurs Tonkinois, who were usually friendly enough. Légionnaires found the local women alluring, once they had got used to their startling habit of lacquering their teeth black. In Vietnamese culture sexual activity carried no moral stigma, and a soldier settled in a permanent post could often acquire a *congai* or temporary wife in the village. This was considered perfectly routine by all concerned, and involved a legal contract negotiated in detail by the girl’s parents and notarized by the village elders. (Such consolations were unknown in French North Africa)

In the exhausting dry season (the European late winter months) the men were kept out of the sun as much as possible and not overworked. Nevertheless, malaria and skin diseases were a constant trial, as were snakes in the tall grass and insects in the roof-thatch. When a man in a small post came down with malaria he was cared for by his mates, who could do little more than sponge him and pile him with blankets during the alternating hot and cold spells. Blackwater fever and scrub typhus could be fatal if a man was not moved to a healthier region for proper nursing, but the lucky ones might be boated down river to the care of the Sisters of Mercy in the coastal hospital at Quang Yen.

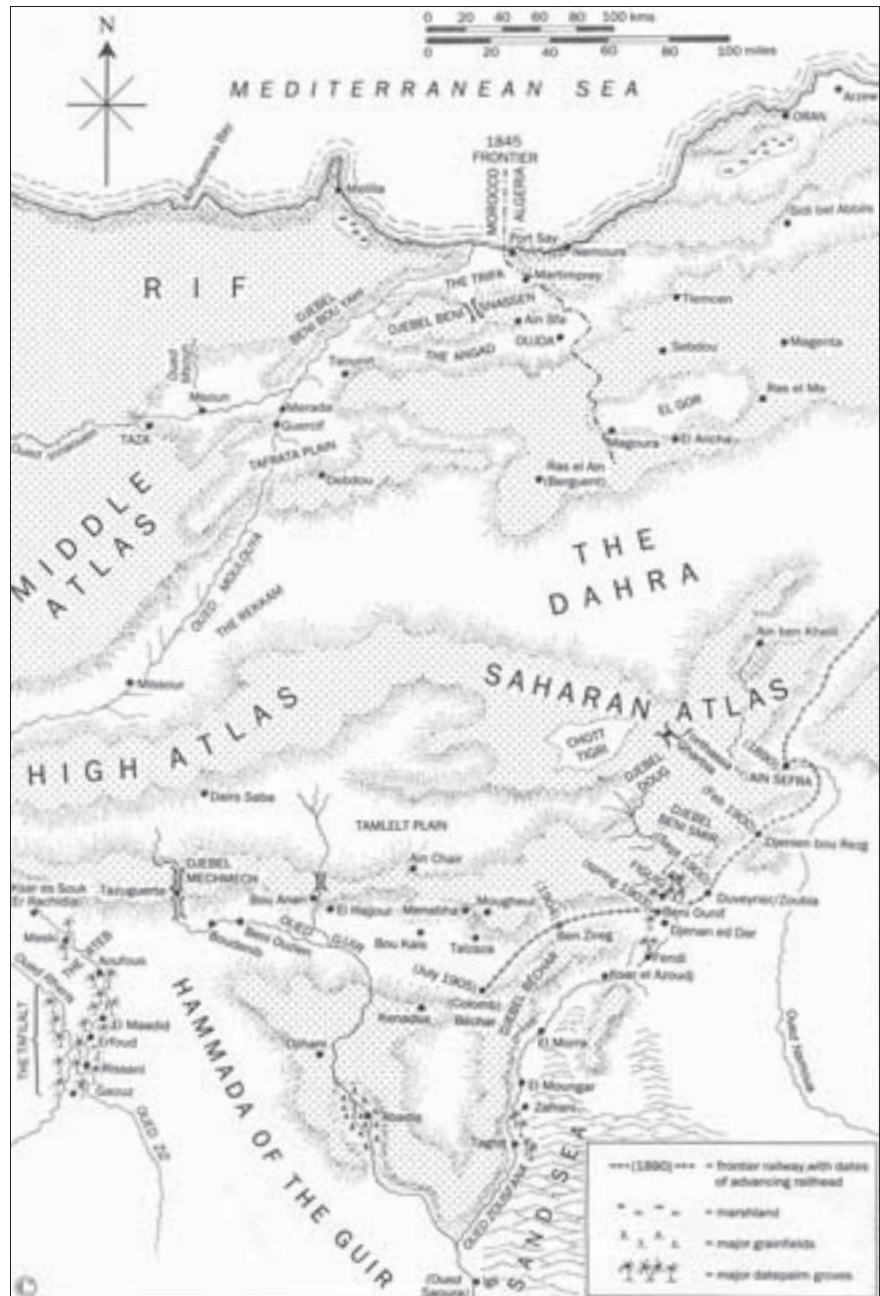
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OFF-DUTY IN TONKIN, c.1905

Most légionnaires spent the great majority of their tour up-country, so off-duty time in cities such as Hanoi and Bac Ninh was a rare treat except for those lucky few who had headquarters jobs (like George Manington, in 1893–95). Here, a veteran *soldat de première classe* navigates a new arrival through the bustling throng in the streets. Dressed in immaculate white M1895 Troupes de Marine walking-out dress with Legion embellishments, the soldiers are surrounded by shopkeepers and their customers; an urchin dressed partly in European cast-offs badgers them to employ him to carry their purchases – like the child servant (far right) of the rich, pale-skinned young lady who is gliding past, wearing a huge, silk-tasselled example of the characteristic Tonkinese woven-fibre hat. At left, a soldier of one of the four regiments of local Tirailleurs Tonkinois, in his little bamboo hat and smartest dark blue and red uniform, pauses by gamblers playing ‘*sapéque*’, betting ‘heads or tails’ on a coin set spinning and covered with a cup. In the foreground a little girl pedlar selling cooking-charcoal threads her way through the crowd, as does a farmer bringing his produce to market on a wheelbarrow, while on the sidewalk a street barber cleans out the ears of a customer with glass and ivory rods. It is all a beguiling spectacle for a soldier just off the riverboat from Haiphong – though he runs some risk of getting his whites soiled by the locals’ constant spitting of red-brown juice from their chewing-cud of *betel*.



Isolated with their men, many company officers earned their strong loyalty; the légionnaires Pfirmann, Martyn and Manington all spoke highly of their own post commanders as humane, reasonable, and brave and decisive in action. Officers were (officially) not supposed to spend more than two continuous years in Tonkin, but enlisted men might serve out the rest of their five-year engagement there – if they managed to avoid the crippling effects of disease for that long, which was unusual. Manington was an exception, because after one bout of blackwater fever his superior education earned him a posting to a clerk's job at Brigade HQ at Bac Ninh, and later in Hanoi, where he served out his time in some comfort.



The largely undelineated Algerian/Moroccan border country at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. The valleys of the Oued Zousfana (bottom centre – the so-called 'corridor of the Legion') and the Oued Guir (further west) were the arena of many Legion operations in 1900–08. In 1907 a second active front opened further north, in the hills and high plains between Oujda and Ras el Ain (Berguent) in the east, and the Moulouya River in the west. (Map by John Richards)

The most usual encounters with the enemy were night sniping attacks on the posts, which seldom inflicted more than a handful of casualties, if any. Some men found the jungle oppressive and terrifying, though others were not blind to its occasional beauty. Long patrols through the forested hills were always utterly exhausting. In temperatures of up to 110° F (43° C) and sweltering humidity, the men spent days hacking paths, climbing and slithering up and down hills and fording streams, disoriented and often lost in the shadows under the tree-canopy. If men collapsed from fever or heatstroke they could seldom be carried far, and – since abandoning them alive would condemn them to a horrible death, at the hands of the bandits or the teeth of jungle rats and ants – they were sometimes mercifully shot. Night movement was almost impossible, and was made perilous by the tigers that roamed the hills; these often took horses and ration-bullocks from posts, and occasionally sentries.

Nevertheless, after months of wary small-unit operations in close country, many men lost their fear of the jungle and became tactically more self-sufficient than in Algeria – watchful, quiet, and good snap shots, led by corporals who were capable of showing initiative under fire. Memoirs make clear that the Legion was noticeably more enduring of the climate and terrain than the younger Navy infantrymen who served alongside them, and much more solid under fire than the agile but sometimes nervous local Tirailleurs Tonkinois (see Plate G).

The Sud-Oranais, 1900–07

Contrary to the 'Beau Geste' image, Legion companies were seldom based for any length of time in the permanent forts planted in the southern desert. Although légionnaires might establish posts, and hold them during their vulnerable first year or two, forts were typically garrisoned by Algerian Tirailleurs and the French criminals of the Bats d'Af, while Legion units usually filled the more mobile role of a strategic reserve.

For example, a typical operation carried out in March 1900 involved a 2,000-strong column led by Col. Bertrand of the 1st RE, with V/1st RE (Maj. Brundsaux) and IV/2nd Tirailleurs Algériens (Maj. Bichemin), 1st Mtd Coy 1st RE, half-squadrons of Spahis and Chasseurs d'Afrique (Africa Light Horse), two 80mm mountain guns, and the usual service troops. The frontier railway being driven south from Ain Sefra just inside the Algerian border had reached Duveyrier (Zoubia). Now, to screen recent conquests further east in the Touat oases from possible attacks across the border, a new post was to be planted at a spot called Igli, some 240km (150 miles) further south. This desolate route, following the underground course of the Oued Zousfana between the dark, rocky hills of the Djebel Béchar to the west and the huge dunes of the Great Western Sand Sea to the east, would become known as 'the corridor of the Legion'.³

In the empty desert, Col. Bertrand's 52 officers and 2,000 men needed no fewer than 2,000 camels to carry baggage, supplies and – above all – water. The occasional wells of vile, mineral-tasting groundwater were usually small and half-buried, and after digging them out it took many hours to water the beasts. Wherever it was judged safe, columns travelled in several parties hours

3. Marches of hundreds of miles were far from unusual for the Legion. In 72 days between 27 April and 26 July 1900, nine officers and 400 men of I/2nd RE under Maj. Letulle made a round-trip march of 1,825km (1,134 miles) between Géryville on the plains and Timimoun in the Touat oases, crossing hundreds of miles of the Sand Sea on the way, in temperatures exceeding 118° F/ 48° C. They did not lose a man.

apart, to give the waterholes a chance to refill. Screened by Arab irregular scouts and French cavalry, the men marched in their white fatigues and covered képis, carrying only rifle equipment and light field kit; their knapsacks and greatcoats were loaded onto camels each morning when they broke camp. On this occasion they met no opposition, but, as always, every overnight camp had to be roughly fortified with *murettes d'Afrique* – rock and sand walls about 1m (3ft) high, to protect the sleeping men from night-time sniping. It took 17 days for them to reach Igli, on 5 April. The légionnaires found that it was nothing more than a bare, furnace-hot rockpile, on which they built shanties with feed-sacks and tent-sections. There they would stay until October, while crosses bloomed in a desolate little cemetery.

The mounted companies

Keeping southern posts like Igli, Taghit and Beni Abbès alive required supply convoys of up to 4,000 camels roughly every six weeks, and each might lose up to 25 per cent of the beasts from hunger, thirst, and neglect by the Arab drivers. In addition, the need to provide escorts for them distorted the proper employment of the Legion and Tirailleur mounted companies, which had been conceived early in the 1880s as highly mobile strike units (see below, 'The Experience of Battle – El Moungar').

F

THE COMBAT OF ZAFRANI, 29 JULY 1900

Before dawn on 29 July, the 1st Mounted Company, 2nd RE (Capt. Sérant) was marching ahead of a northbound camel-convoy from Igli, following the underground course of the Oued Zousfana river between the Djebel Béchar hills to the west and the edge of the Great Western Sand Sea to the east. When they were a few miles north of the Zafrani waterholes, the leading scouts reported 400–500 Arab warriors of the Dawi Mani tribe at the next waterpoint, the cisterns of El Moungar. Sérant sent Lt. Pauly back to warn the convoy, with the company's own baggage camels and part of his 4th Platoon, while the rest formed square on one of a line of hillocks west of the track. At about 4.10am the Spahi patrol that Sérant had sent northwards galloped in, followed closely by three large groups of Arab riders, each with a green banner. Their first charge carried a few of them actually inside the square before they were killed, but steady firing held off subsequent attacks. Meanwhile, however, Lt. Pauly's platoon, returning to rejoin, were caught on the flat ground south-east of the hillock and ridden down, losing eight men killed and several more wounded.

(1) Corporal Erich was leading three other légionnaires on foot; showing admirable calm, they knelt and fired steadily, stretching about 15 riders dead in the dust before the Arabs veered off in search of easier prey. Erich and Privates Cassier, Spierckel and Berney were later commended for their conduct.

For this reconstruction of Cpl. Erich's action, based on photos of the terrain, we show the légionnaires in covered, sun-flapped képis – the pith helmet only began to be issued in the Sud-Oranais during that same year. The greatcoat was worn in the cold hours of darkness, sometimes fully buttoned, sometimes only at the throat to drape over the fatigues and personal equipment like a cloak. Since mounted company men put the coat on and off at intervals, and the long waist sash was tricky to wind on without help, we show it worn under the coat for convenience.

(2) The Arabs were well mounted, and magnificent riders; at Zafrani witnesses reported them reaching down from the saddle at the gallop to sweep up dismounted or wounded warriors. Tribesmen displayed their wealth by the relative quality of their clothing and harness, and by this date most warriors in the Sud-Oranais had replaced their old '*bushfar*' flintlock muzzle-loaders with late 19th-century single-shot rifles. Their insistence on firing from the saddle wasted precious ammunition, but all the Legion dead and wounded at Zafrani had gunshot wounds.

(3) By far the most common weapon on the frontier was the '*mushaka*' – the 1871 Spanish 11mm version of the simple, sturdy Remington 'rolling-block' rifle, which was available in thousands. The nomadic tribes and oasis-dwellers also had significant numbers of the so-called '*bu hafra*' Martini-Henry and '*sasbu*' Chassepot or Gras, and some repeaters – '*tsa'iy'a*' Lebel's, and even a few '*sitta'shiya*' Winchesters. Ammunition was usually at a premium, however, and the tribesmen had to collect their used cartridge cases for reloading with black powder and percussion caps improvised with petrol and the heads of red matches.



2

1

3

The conditions men faced on campaign were dictated above all by the terrain where they were deployed. This scene conforms with the popular image of a North African oasis – water, a thick plantation of date palms, and in the distance the minaret of the village mosque. It shows Boudenib on the upper Guir River in Morocco, which légionnaires captured, and later defended against a hostile *harka*, in 1908. (Postcard by J. Geiser, Algiers)



By contrast with the photo of Boudenib, this shows the kind of rugged hill country which Legion units had to penetrate when – as was often the case – Berber tribes wisely refused to come down and face the devastating firepower of French columns on the open plains. This is the ridge above a gorge of the Moulouya River.



This view west of Boudenib shows the utter emptiness of the gravel-desert that covers much of Morocco south of the Atlas Mountains, with a virtually straight horizon dividing white sky from tawny-brown earth. The légionnaires who had to march across featureless terrain like this found it disorienting and oppressive. The white spot in the left centre is a man, about 180m (200 yards) from the camera; in this terrain men might emerge from, or disappear into, an invisible gulley at a moment's notice. (Author's photo)





A légionnaire slogging across the Sud-Oranais, with a donkey loaded with baggage and a water can. The soldier carries a bamboo walking-staff and wears only rifle order, a canteen and haversack, and what looks like a tentcloth roll slung from his shoulder. Several photos show légionnaires wearing the *casque colonial* sideways like this. The drawing is dated 1911, and signed by Maurice Mahut, a well-known illustrator who visited the Legion and made drawings from life.

Their mounts were strong, enduring mules, one being assigned to every two men – who faced severe punishment if they did not care for it scrupulously. The mule carried its own feed and the men's rations and kit; one légionnaire rode, the other marched beside him, and they changed places every hour (see commentary, Plate D). They could maintain a pace of about 6kmph (4mph) from well before dawn until late afternoon, covering – depending on the exact terrain – up to 80km (50 miles) before pitching their defended overnight camp. They could keep this up for as long as 15 days at a time, broken up by a few rest-days; with such a radius of action, and infantry rifles and training, they were far more versatile than horse cavalry, and had far greater firepower. These elite companies were much more likely

Légionnaires of a mounted company in the early 1900s riding grey mules in double file and marching on foot; the horseman in the right background seems to be a Spahi. The soldiers wear white pith helmets, white fatigues with blue sashes, rifle equipment with Y-straps, and light field kit. The nearest man seems to wear non-regulation dark puttees instead of anklets. (Courtesy the late M. Raoul Brunon, Musée de l'Empéri)



The mud-brick villages and the palm plantations inside oases were both densely packed, facing attacking troops with miniature versions of urban and jungle fighting. This photo shows a scene inside Boudenib after its occupation in 1908. (Photo Garaud)



Characteristic terrain in the upper Guir River country in south-east Morocco, with a red rock *gara* or tabletop rising sheer out of the sand. The clumps of bushes and dwarf palm indicate an underground watercourse. (Photo Garaud)



to see combat than conventional infantry, and légionnaires volunteered for them for the same reasons that modern recruits apply to join paratroop battalions. However, the mule companies' versatility led to them being over-used, and the cost of a relentless tempo of operations in extremes of terrain and climate was a cumulative exhaustion. This was aggravated by the Army's tendency to employ them for hard labour on the desert tracks in the intervals between their operations. No légionnaire lasted more than two years at a time with '*la Montée*'.

Morocco, 1908

The experience of the three Legion battalions shipped to Casablanca from Algeria in 1907 was very different. The subsequent campaign on the fertile Chaouia plain involved conventional operations by 5,500-man brigades of horse, foot and guns, for which the légionnaires had been well prepared by their regular training exercises. This division-sized landing force was well supported by an efficient staff, commissariat and medical department. Operations were relatively brief, over fairly short distances, with efficient lines of supply and communication, and there was little sickness. The worst that the infantry faced was the frequent heavy rain, which made the black mud of the plain heavy going.



The infantry were organized in six two-battalion marching regiments under experienced colonels, and were housed at first in large tented camps and later in timber hutments. The Legion units were deployed in mixed brigades alongside Tirailleurs Algériens and Zouaves, Chasseurs d'Afrique and Spahis, and artillery. These struck out across the plain for operations lasting a week or so, trying to bring to battle amorphous tribal forces of several thousand mainly mounted Arab warriors. Though the enemy were dangerous enough to keep officers and men on their toes (see below, 'The Experience of Battle – Sidi el Mekki'), battle casualties were not heavy. Even so, after three months' operations average Legion company strength seems to have slipped from 240 to c.160 men.

By contrast with the eastern Moroccan fronts, the units shipped to Casablanca in the west were comfortably housed in timber hutments. This photo shows légionnaires and Zouaves together in one of the permanent camps outside the port. (Postcard by Boussuge, Cassablanca)



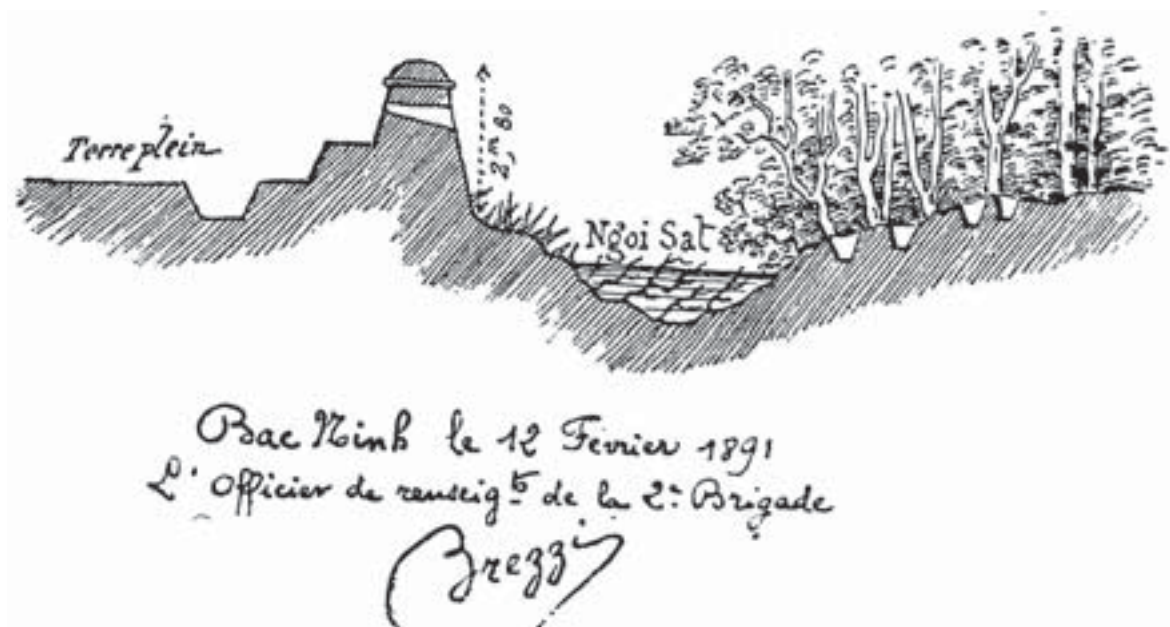
The spring 1908 Chaouia campaign, conducted over 9,000 square kilometres (3,500 square miles) of open plains, saw the simultaneous use of new and old military technology – both wireless telegraphy and this observation balloon. It was visible from many miles, and warned the highly mobile tribal horsemen of the approach of the French column. Nicknamed *Le Cafard*, 'the Beetle', it was roundly cursed by the troops, and was soon left behind in the coastal camp. (From Rankin, photo Reginald Kann)

The brigades moved over the open plain in square formations up to a mile across, the front face usually composed of two battalions side by side in a single rank. The légionnaires attracted the interest of the accompanying correspondent of the London *Times*, Lt. Col. Rankin, by their swagger: when the commanding general was slow to grant them the coveted colonial pay rate for the campaign, they sent him a tortoise painted in tricolour with the words 'Double pay'. More to the point, Rankin admired their endurance on the march, economy with ammunition and great coolness under fire – 'Finer fighting troops it would be impossible to find in any army'. He approved of the fact that (in contrast to British practice) their big packs, with rations and bivouac gear, enabled each squad to make camp and feed itself every night, without waiting for the commissariat to bring up tents and food.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

Typically of this period, when soldierly manliness demanded a certain restraint in self-expression, Legion rankers' memoirs may reveal men's feelings about the fatigue of marching, the misery of bad-weather bivouacs, the ordeals of wounds and disease, or even their terror of tigers – but not about actual combat. They may grumble about the French government's neglect of them, and they often mourn their comrades who fell or died of disease, but not at any length. When serving in mixed formations they may proudly claim that their endurance and their morale around the campfires were higher than that of other types of white infantry. They admit to their fear and fury at facing enemies who habitually mutilated any wounded who could not be recovered from the field, and they regard it as entirely natural that they themselves seldom took prisoners. They invariably maintain that légionnaires were eager for action – even when conditions were at their worst, when the eventual chance to fight back brought relief. Their feelings must therefore be imagined from their behaviour, as in the following brief accounts of specific engagements.

Tonkin: cross-section of part of the defences of the rebel fort at Hu Thué, sketched by a 2nd Brigade intelligence officer named Brezzin after its final capture in January 1891. This was a comparatively thinly protected sector, but attackers (from the right) still faced *panji*-pits concealed in the jungle; the Ngoi Sat stream, its bed and the bank beyond also sown thickly with *panjis*; and, throughout their advance, rifle fire from loopholed brick ramparts 3m (9ft.) high. (From Manington)



Tonkin – Thuong Lam and Hu Thué, 1889 and 1890

An example of a typical small-unit action is provided by Cpl. Pfirmann's last fight, in September 1889. His 4th Company, I/1st RE and one of Tirailleurs Tonkinois were sent to search Thuong Lam village for reported bandits; these marauders often occupied villages while they extended their control over the surrounding countryside by terror and looting. Villages were protected by sturdy earth walls with tall, thick bamboo hedges – virtually palisades, and more difficult because they were yielding – pierced only by a strong timber gateway. Fruit and shade trees also grew among the houses, so any activity was masked from the outside. Thuong Lam was set amid flooded paddyfields, and was approachable only in single file along a dyke.

Lieutenant Chavy's Tirailleurs took point, as always, while Lt. Ollivier remained in the saddle to watch and control his cordon of légionnaires in the paddies. The village was silent; but as soon as the leading Tirailleur squad began to break down the barricaded gate, considerable numbers of bandits sprang up inside the walls and opened rapid fire. Chavy and his corporal were killed; Lt. Ollivier's horse was shot under him, his orderly was killed by his side, then he himself fell, mortally wounded in the stomach and spine. The short-range firing was intense; the légionnaires could seldom spot targets behind the thick bamboo, it was extremely difficult and dangerous for them to get close up to the walls, and these then presented a formidable obstacle to breaking in. The firing went on long enough for the sound to bring Capt. Nourichel's nearby company of III/2nd RE to help, but then he too was shot dead. By the time the surviving bandits broke out on a blind side and fled, the French had suffered 11 killed including the two company commanders (seven of them légionnaires), and 20 wounded (11 of them légionnaires). One of those killed was an old private named Olbrecht, who still wore the Mexico Medal from the 1860s campaign in which the Legion had won renown at Camerone. Corporal Pfirmann had distinguished himself in this action, but bullets smashed his right arm in two places. He was promoted sergeant on the spot and cited for the Military Medal, but he had to endure 11 hours of jolting agony in the saddle of a nervous pony on the way back to the Phu Lang Thuong depot.

The memoir of Cpl. Martyn of 1st Company, II/1st RE, includes an example of larger-scale actions, during attempts to locate and assault a major bandit base at Hue Thué in December 1890. This lair in the thickly forested hills was well sited on two neighbouring heights linked by a communication trench, with a strong flanking stockade position and a stream covering the approaches to a large Chinese-style brick fort; this had 3m (9ft.) loopholed walls and protruding bastions, protected by belts of ditches, *panji*-sticks and palisades. On 9 December, Martyn was with a reconnaissance patrol led in person by his Capt. Plessier, who sketched the defences before retreating, at a cost of six casualties shot by sentries in treetop platforms. Despite this intelligence, and the obvious preparedness of the defenders – who were disciplined irregular soldiers, partly armed with Spencer repeaters and led by a renegade military mandarin – two days later a Naval Infantry battalion failed in an ill-judged frontal attack. This was repeated on 22 December by Lt. Col. Winckelmeyer, with 1,000 white and local Navy troops and five guns; he too was driven back, with 100 casualties, leaving his dead and their rifles on the field. Half of Capt. Plessier's Legion company was grabbed from other duties and thrown against the palisaded outwork at short notice, and this attempt cost them nine killed and 24 wounded – at least 50 per cent

casualties. Only a couple of légionnaires got through even the outer stockade, and one of those was soon struggling under fire to rescue his mate from the *panji*-pit where he lay impaled through the thigh.

The Sud-Oranais – El Moungar, 1903

In late August 1903, after a large Arab and Berber force had failed in badly coordinated attacks on Taghit fort on the lower Oued Zousfana, some 300 Shaamba camel-riders from this *harka* struck off eastwards into the Sand Sea, where they remained unaccounted for. The Taghit scare had halted a large southwards camel-convoy, but this was then ordered to get moving again, in three parties. The first reached Taghit without incident. The second left El Morra before dawn on 2 September, escorted by 20 rankers from a Spahi unit that was new to the frontier, and the experienced Capt. Vauchez's half of 22nd Mounted Coy, 2nd RE, with two officers, 111 NCOs and men, and 64 mules. Vauchez chose to ride ahead of the camel-trains, and to halt at 9.30am for a meal a mile or two south of the cisterns at El Moungar – almost exactly on the site of Capt. Sérant's action in July 1900 (see Plate F). For some inexplicable reason, Vauchez also failed to put out sentries.

West of the flat track were a line of low hillocks, and to the east some sand dunes and an invisible gulley. As the first camel-train was just catching up with the halted escort, the Shaamba who had been waiting in ambush at exactly that spot opened a heavy fire from the gulley. Some then rushed westwards across the track north of the two Legion platoons, cutting them off from the camels that were the raiders' main target. Under close-range fire from two sides on open ground, the légionnaires formed skirmish lines facing east and north; Lt. Selchauhansen and several NCOs and men were quickly shot down, and Vauchez and more of his men fell when his attempted charge to the north was stopped dead by heavy firing. In some disorder the survivors had to abandon the mules – including those carrying water and ammunition – and fall back on three hillocks west of the track. Two Spahis were sent south to fetch help from Taghit, 40km (25 miles) away.

G

PATROL CLASH IN NORTHERN TONKIN, c.1905

Although the major campaigns on the north-west and north-east frontiers with China were over by c.1898, three Legion battalions remained in garrison at this date: from west to east, IV/2nd RE headquartered at Lao Cai, III/2nd RE at Ha Giang, and II/1st RE at Cao Bang. This painting reconstructs a typical encounter during a platoon operation lasting several days, for which the troops carry more ammunition and bivouac gear than for local patrols. Led by the usual 'point' squad of Tirailleurs Tonkinois, the column was approaching a village along a path flanked by a stand of huge banyan trees, when it came under fire from a bandit gang who had holed up in the Buddhist pagoda on the outskirts – the strongest available building. Now the Legion lieutenant orders his men forward at the double to support the Tirailleurs, who are armed with the old single-shot Gras rifle with black-powder cartridges. While some légionnaires dump their tent-rolls under cover of the banyans before working their way out to the right flank, others dash forward and to the left – not without the real risk of casualties, since some of the bandits are armed with Winchesters.

Legion units in Tonkin had by now received the Troupes Coloniales' khaki drill M1901 tropical uniform, but some photos show the khaki jacket worn with uncovered M1886 white pith helmets and white fatigue trousers. For short local patrols the men often carried only a single M1888 ammunition pouch, to save weight in the exhausting heat and humidity, but for longer operations they added a mid-1890s modification of the old 'de Négrier' chest pouch of the 1880s; made of either white canvas or black leather, this was now divided into two halves slung under the arms. Officers wore whites or khakis at personal choice; they were also distinguished by modified Colonial Artillery grenade helmet badges, Legion grenade collar badges, gold braid epaulette-fixing loops on the shoulders, and removable rank rings around the cuffs. The standard sidearm was the 8mm six-shot M1892 revolver.





The battlefield of Zafrani, photographed a month after the action of 29 July 1900 (see Plate F) almost exactly the same spot as the El Moungar ambush of September 1903. Broken crates, harness, and the bones of mules and men litter the foot of the hillock defended by Capt. Sérant's mounted company from 2nd RE. The Dawi Mani tribesmen had not returned here since the action, and the escort for the next convoy down the Oued Zousfana trail to Igli picked up several finely decorated Arab weapons among the debris.

For the next seven hours the légionnaires and perhaps ten Spahis held the bald hillocks, under fire from three sides and attacks that once came to hand-to-hand range, while the ever-growing number of wounded suffered agonies of thirst. Much of the command responsibility was shouldered, coolly, by QM-Sgt. Tisserand, until he suffered his second wound at about 2pm and had to hand over to Cpl. Dietz – by then the senior able-bodied man in a party that had started the day with a captain, a lieutenant and seven senior NCOs. By the time relief arrived the Legion butcher's bill was 34 killed, both officers and a private mortally wounded, 47 wounded who would eventually recover, and two corporals and 28 privates unhurt – 83 casualties out of a morning strength of 113 all ranks. The Shaamba got away with the enormous booty of 90-plus loaded camels, 25 Lebel rifles and 5,000 cartridges. The subsequent enquiry placed the blame, justly enough, on Capt. Vauchez's tactical failings; he was an officer with a history of underestimating the tribesmen. Quartermaster-Sergeant Tisserand was given a battlefield commission, Sgt. Charlier was admitted to the Legion of Honour, and eight other survivors were awarded the Military Medal.

Morocco – Sidi el Mekki, 1908

During Gen. D'Amade's 1908 Chaouia campaign the most critical action – in the sense that it might have ended in defeat – was fought at Sidi el Mekki on 2 February. Aiming to sweep up a reported herd of cattle to deny this resource to the rebels, Col. Bourteghoud marched from Ber Rechid before dawn with about 1,500 infantry (VI/1st RE, and two companies of Algerians), a cavalry squadron



The campaigns in the Sud-Oranais and Morocco were recorded by a number of commercial photographers, and photos of the wounded – albeit carefully posed after they had been cleaned up and issued fresh uniforms – seem to have been popular. This group of casualties from Morocco were photographed with three medical orderlies at the Sidi bel Abbès depot.

and a battery. Leaving most of the troopers to ride herd on the cattle, he was probing further south when, at about 7am, some 5,000 Arab horsemen appeared and cut the infantry off. The six companies formed square and fell back, attacked repeatedly by swirls of riders; the Moroccans were mostly armed with modern single-shot rifles, but their insistence on shooting from the saddle meant that they usually fired high. They were quick to spot weak points and to press home attacks, but their lack of coordination prevented any systematic follow-through.

The clouds of Arabs got within 90m (100 yards), but were stopped by volleys and the fire of the single machine gun outside one face of the square. When its crew were all shot down, Capt. Bosquet of the Legion served it alone until he had used up all the available ammo-strips. At one point the square had to double up into two shorter ranks in each face, to prevent horsemen crashing through – a significant detail. A Legion officer would tell Rankin with pride of his men's coolness under attack. They had taken an earlier opportunity to 'liberate' some livestock for the evening cookpot, and he saw one of his légionnaires pause between shots to pat reassuringly the head of a baby goat sticking out of the front of his greatcoat. The square got

A rare photo actually showing légionnaires in action. This is the firing line of one of the battalions engaged at Settatt on the Chaouia on 15 January 1908. Given that they faced large numbers of determined cavalry, this single rank might seem a risky formation; but volley-fire with repeating rifles was devastating, the first line was always supported by other units waiting close behind them in platoon columns to deploy at need, and the artillery was always close by. (From Rankin, photo Reginald Kann)



THE VETERAN, MOROCCO, MAY 1914

(1) This corporal of Maj. Met's I/1st RE is taking part in a review before Gen. Lyautey, the French C-in-C in Morocco, near Taza on 18 May 1914. Fighting their way past Riata Berber tribesmen, his battalion have just successfully spearheaded the eastern 'pincer' under Gen. Baumgarten in the final opening of the 'Taza gap' through the northern hills, thus uniting the north-eastern and north-western fronts of the French penetration. For parade, our veteran has removed the campaign cover from his képi, and pulled the chinstrap down. His campaign uniform in Morocco has been, for about the past five years, the Troupes Coloniales' M1901 khakis, with (since c.1903) the Army's M1900 gaiters. Insignia are limited to the red collar patches with dark blue regimental numbers, and his rank stripes – sometimes sewn to the khaki jacket, sometimes fastened with hooks-and-eyes or buttons. His rifle equipment includes the M1892 belt-support Y-straps, three M1888 ammo pouches (one at the back) each holding 24 rounds, and the frogged scabbard for his fixed bayonet. His knapsack has been laid aside, but he still carries the water canteen slung on his right hip and the haversack on his left.

(2) In the field in summertime, both in the Sud-Oranais and by this date in northern Morocco, the usual headgear was the cork '*casque colonial*'. This is the M1890, made in khaki rather than white, so it did not need the earlier separate khaki cover.

(3) Standard issue in the Legion since the mid-1890s, the 8mm M1886/93 Lebel rifle was 130cm (51in.) long and weighed 4.41kg (9.73lb) fully loaded with ten rounds – nine in the magazine and one 'up the spout'. Its rather flimsy cruciform-section needle bayonet was 64cm (25in.) long.

(4) The Lebel took the world's first general-issue 'smokeless powder' rounds, which were fed singly from the breech into a tubular magazine beneath the barrel. The cartridge was actually 16mm across the rimmed base, so tapered sharply to the 8mm bullet; this shape caused feed problems (especially in later automatic weapons) for 40 years. It was the result of the conceited haste of the Minister of Defence in 1886, Gen. Boulanger, to rush the development programme through while he was in office. This forced the design bureau to marry the new 8mm bullet and revolutionary nitrocellulose propellant with an existing magazine system designed for the 11mm rounds of the experimental Kropatschek rifle. The solid brass, pointed, 'boat-tailed' Type F bullet was introduced in 1898, replacing the flat-nosed, jacketed lead 'Balle M'. Although the new round had a propellant charge reduced from 231 to 197 grains, the Type F had an increased muzzle velocity, increased maximum range (4,500 yards), and increased penetration.

(5) The légionnaire always wore his full medals when parading in the field. These are (from left to right): the Médaille Militaire for gallantry – the coveted enlisted ranks' decoration, which could to some extent shield a recipient from the consequences of later misbehaviour in barracks and bars; the Médaille de Tonkin, for a tour of service in that theatre from 1883 onwards; and the Médaille de Maroc, 1909 – four specific campaign bars were awarded retrospectively, including 'Haut-Guir' for a decisive desert campaign in south-east Morocco in 1908.

(6) The big 2-litre hot-climate water canteen (*bidon*), covered with old greatcoat cloth, was not always filled only with water. The soldier's '*quart*' mug was usually hung from one of the plug strings.

(7) The haversack (*étui-musette*) was a versatile field bag. It was supposed to contain a day's rations (fresh bread, meat and often vegetables), and many soldiers added their eating-irons, washing and smoking kit, and fatigue sidecap. In northern Morocco a second haversack often replaced the knapsack when in the field, and in such cases more of the latter's official contents would be transferred: up to six spare packets of ammo, giving him 120 rounds in all; essential rifle cleaning kit, and boot-grease; emergency ration tins of chocolate and concentrated soup, and hard-tack biscuits. Any or all of the items illustrated here might have been carried in the field by a man with two haversacks:

(8) Mess tin (*gamelle individuel*), with its lid, and a lift-out eating dish with a detachable handle.

(9) Fork, spoon, pocketknife, and condiments. The fork and spoon were issue items; claspknives were privately acquired – along with tobacco, they often figured among the 'comforts' provided for troops by charitable organizations, but this is a Troupes Coloniales model picked up in Tonkin.

To carry salt and pepper, many men cut themselves a short length of hollow bamboo from both sides of a joint (bamboo grows in Morocco as well as in Indochina). (10) Towel, and soap. The issue towel (*serviette*) measured 70 by 80cm (27.5 by 31.5in.), with red stripes inset from at least two of the edges. (11) Tobacco pouch and pipe – these were obviously private-purchase items. Men with a talent for needlework might while away empty hours making themselves pouches from scraps of old uniform cloth, and embroidering them as souvenirs of their travels – here 'Phu-Lang-Thuong' and 'Cao-Bang', main 1st RE postings in the Delta and 2nd Territory of Tonkin. (12) Rations, officially carried in the knapsack. Two of the separated double bags were carried, one with sugar and coffee beans, the other with beans and salted rice. The standard biscuit ration was 24 per man.

(13) M1897 fatigue sidecap (*bonnet de police*), made of greatcoat cloth.



back to Ber Rechid after 19 hours of marching and fighting, at a cost of 11 killed and 41 wounded including the colonel. (On another occasion Rankin saw a légionnaire in the firing line hit first in one hand, then in the other. Each time, he got the man next to him to bandage him roughly, before painfully carrying on working his bolt and trigger, with the blasphemous announcement that if the Arabs thought they had put him out of action, they had another think coming.)

THE AFTERMATH OF BATTLE

Medical treatment

While French rear-base hospitals were adequate by the standards of the day, the initial medical care for légionnaires wounded on frontier battlefields was rudimentary. When a doctor was available, they received opium pills or morphine injections for the pain. However, in the 1890s–1900s there was still no understanding of the mechanisms of infection or the full consequences of internal bleeding, and no such things as antibiotics or blood transfusion. Deaths from sepsis or shock were therefore frequent, and belly wounds usually led quickly to fatal peritonitis. Wounds were dressed on the spot, broken bones immobilized, and casualties were evacuated up the chain of communication by whatever means happened to be available. In Tonkin that meant, initially, a tent-cloth hammock on a shoulder-pole carried with difficulty by stumbling coolies; long-distance transport was by river boat, which was certainly less of an ordeal than the desert casualty's mule-chair, mule-litter or camel-litter.

Each battalion had a medical officer, as did the larger forts, but dispersed companies had only a patchily trained orderly. (The lieutenant commanding a small post had a handbook giving rough guidance on diagnosis, but medication for disease was usually limited to hit-or-miss dosing with bismuth

In any wilderness theatre of operations, logistics are the key to everything. This postcard, dated at Méknès in western Morocco in December 1912, shows a regular supply convoy travelling along what passed for a highway – note the telegraph pole. Four parallel columns of two-wheeled *araba* carts stretch far back into the dusty distance. A few mounted outriders are scattered along the flanks, and on the nearside a half-squad of Tirailleurs Algériens infantry can be made out. This terrain is typical of the region where I/2nd and VI/2nd RE were then operating, during the busy early days of Gen. Lyautey's French Protectorate. (Postcard by Schmitt, Rabat)



or quinine.) Even in a two-company fort like Taghit the medical officer had only a small sickroom, and quite inadequate supplies to treat a large influx of wounded. When the 49 casualties from El Mounkar arrived there in the early hours of 4 September 1903, the resident Dr Boulin was himself suffering from an eye infection. He, Drs de Lignerolles and Mazellier from the relief columns, and the fort's two company orderlies did what they could, soon helped by the famous missionary Father de Foucauld, who rode over from Beni Abbès. The Danish Lt. Selchauhansen died on the first day; most of the other wounded had to be laid out on piles of dried grass on the hard floors of various storerooms. Five more orderlies with medical supplies arrived from Ain Sefra soon afterwards, but, given the standard of care that was possible, it was still extraordinary that only one more of the ten most serious cases died of his wounds.

Memoirs do not seem to bear out the fictional image of Legion medical officers as callous and unskilled (by the normal standards of those days). Manington spoke highly of his battalion medical officer, Dr Aragon, and enthusiastically of the regime at the Legion convalescent hospital amid the sea breezes at Arzew on the Algerian coast. After surviving typhoid he spent three months there, sleeping, loafing and rebuilding his strength with swims and country walks. A high proportion of légionnaires returning from Dahomey, Madagascar and Tonkin were sent to Arzew straight off the ship. Landing in Algiers in December 1889, Sgt. Pfirrmann received prolonged treatment for his shattered arm at the port's base hospital before spending two separate spells at Arzew. His arm proved to be permanently withered, however, and he was medically discharged in February 1892. More than two years of treatment hardly accords with the legend of crippled beggars invariably being simply kicked out the gates of Sidi bel Abbès. (Incidentally, both Jean Pfirrmann's son and his grandson subsequently obtained commissions in the Legion, the former rising to command a regiment.)

Legion warrant officer and men photographed at Taza in early summer 1914, wearing the Troupes Coloniales' M1901 khaki field uniform with matching pith helmet (see Plate H). This shows a silhouette completely changed from that recorded by Benigni in the drawing on page 9. However, at this date the blue greatcoat was still worn with the khaki uniform, as was the képi with a khaki cover. (Postcard by J. Geiser, Algiers)



Some men who had been seduced by the Far East took their discharge in Indochina and set up in trade, usually running small shops or bars. A few of the more energetic and ambitious might obtain land grants and try to make a success as planters of rubber trees or other cash crops (though few succeeded). Most men took their discharge in Algeria, though those who had signed up in France received a travel warrant for the passage back there.

Only those who had served for 15 years and taken French citizenship were entitled to a pension, and if they were still healthy they could expect

19^e CORPS D'ARMÉE.

— DIVISION D'ORDRE —

BRIGADE

2^e RÉGIMENT ÉTRANGER

Certificat de bonne conduite.

LA COMMISSION SPÉCIALE d'UN 2^e RÉGIMENT ÉTRANGER

instituée en exécution du Règlement du 20 octobre 1892 sur le Service intérieur des troupes,

Certifie que le *Militaire de l'armée* **Seeggald**

Infanterie 2^e art. 18144

né le *Culture* 1877 à *Genève*

canton de *Général* département de *Montevideo*

taille de un mètre 710 millimètres, cheveux *bruns*, yeux *gris*, front *haut*, nez *droit*, bouche *normale*, menton *court*, visage *ovale*, marques particulières *aucune*

a tenu une bonne conduite pendant le temps qu'il est resté sous les drapeaux, et qu'il y a constamment servi avec honneur et fidélité.

La présente attestation est donnée sur la proposition du Capitaine d'art *Le 24: hennep* et du Chef d'art *Seeggald* auquel appartient le *Militaire de l'armée* *Seeggald* *Infanterie 2^e art. 18144*

après examen du registre des punitions, en ce qui le concerne.

Fait à *Genève*, le *17 juillet* 1901.

Le Président de la Commission spéciale,

Approuvé par
Le Général de brigade

1901

1901

60

preferential employment in junior civil service jobs. However, a fair number were indeed discharged with their health broken by hard labour and tropical diseases, and for them the outlook was bleak. A Federation of Societies of Former Légionnaires in France and the Colonies did exist, but at that time such mutual-assistance societies were few and only modestly funded, and they could not offer much help to a man needing employment or care. (Issue No. 8 of the Federation's monthly journal, *La Légion Étrangère*, dated 30 November 1912, advertises contact addresses in Paris, Reims, Troyes, Lunéville, Marseille, Nancy, Belfort, Epinal and Mulhouse; in Berne, Bienne, Chaux-de-Fonds and Fribourg, Switzerland; and in Tunis and Hanoi.)

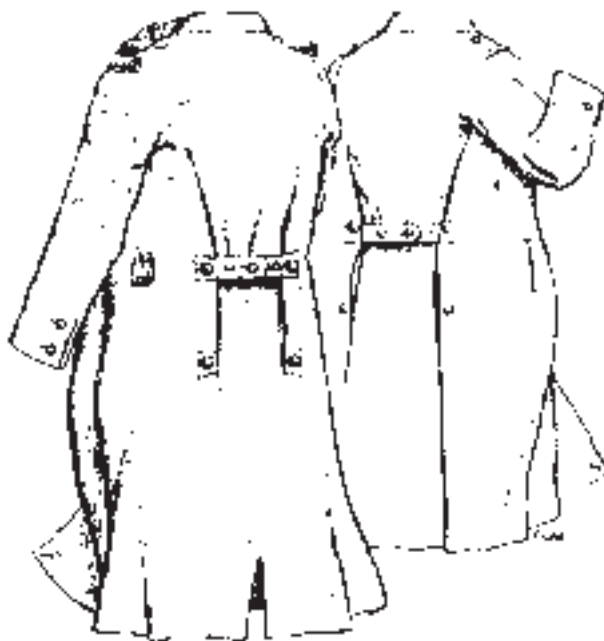
16											
Enregistrement successif des effets de la 2 ^e portion.											
(Ne pas inscrire d'avance les noms des mois ; ne les inscrire que s'ils comportent des distributions.)											
DÉSIGNATION DES EFFETS.	Mois de décembre 1912	Mois de Janvier 1913	Mois de Février 1913	Mois de Mars 1913	Mois de Avril 1913	Mois de Mai 1913	Mois de Juin 1913	Mois de Juillet 1913	Mois de Août 1913	Mois de Septembre 1913	Mois de Octobre 1913
Aligrette.....											
Besace.....											
Boîte à graisse à deux compart ^{ts}											
Bobine en bois renfermant six al- guilles et une aigle emmanchée.....											
Bourgeron de toile.....	25										
Bretelles de pantalon.....	2										
Brosse à boutons.....											
Brosse à cheval.....											
Brosse à habits.....											
Brosse à relaire.....											
Brosse double à chaussures.....											
Brosse pour armes.....											
Cache-éperons.....											
Caléçon.....	25										
Calotte.....	2										
Ceinture de laine.....	2										
Chemise de flanelle.....	2										
Chemise.....	25										
Ciseaux de pansage.....											
Ciseaux de petite monture.....											
Chaiçon et accessoires.....											
Corde à fourrage.....											
Courroie de capote ou de manteau.....	2										
Couvre-muque.....	2										
Cravate ou col.....	25										
Cuillier.....											
Dé à condre.....											
Dragonne de sabre.....											
Epaulettes (Paires d').....	2										
Eponge.....											
Eponsette.....											
Equipement de tambour complet.....											
Etrille.....											
Etui-musette.....	2										
Faux éperons.....											
Fil (chevaux).....											
Flote à tripoli.....											
Fouet.....											
Fourchette.....											
Garniture individuelle.....	2										
Gants (Paires de).....											
Gilet de flanelle.....											
Glace.....											
Gland { Sous-officier.....											
de chéchia. { Soldat.....											
Guetres de toile (Paire de).....	2										
Martinet.....											
Mitclausure de cuirasse.....											
Mouchoir de poche.....	25										
Musette de pansage.....											

Pages 16–18 in the paybook listed the issue of items classed as 'de la 2^e portion', some of which are illustrated on Plates A and H. This page shows the issue to Légionnaire Seewald of two fatigue blouses, a pair of braces (suspenders), two pairs drawers, a nightcap, a wool sash, a flannel belt (for use with underclothes), two shirts, a 'greatcoat strap', a képi-cover/sun-flap, two *cravates*, a pair of epaulettes, a haversack, a mess tin, a pair of cloth gaiters and two handkerchiefs. The following page – not illustrated – lists two pairs of fatigue trousers, a cleaning-kit bag with contents, two towels, a pair of foot-cloths and a mug.



ABOVE

Various markings inside the left front lining of the 2nd RE veste, including a large ink stamping of the owner's *matricule* or serial number



ABOVE RIGHT

Throughout the period covered in this book the greatcoat (see Plate F), of a shade officially described as 'blued-iron grey' but actually quite a rich colour when new, served as the légionnaire's outer garment when in the field in all seasons, and as extra protection when sleeping under canvas. To free the legs for easy marching the front corners of the skirt were always worn fastened back to the lower button on the rear pleat, and the fit at the waist was adjusted by the buttoned half-belt. There were slight differences at cuff and rear hem between the M1872 (left) and the model introduced from 1897, though the old style continued in use until stocks ran out. (Drawing by Gerry Embleton)

A man who left the Legion after five years while still in his prime – like Léon Silbermann, who survived both Dahomey and Madagascar – might choose to enlist in the *Troupes Coloniales*, which offered a good enlistment bounty and better terms of service. After finding themselves at a loss in civilian life, other veterans who were still fit enough to get past the medical officer might simply return to the Legion, usually under another false name.

MUSEUMS

Musée du Souvenir de la Légion Étrangère

Route de la Thuillière, Aubagne (13). Tel: (0)4 42 18 82 41

Opening hours: 1 June–30 September: daily 10am–12 noon and 3pm–7pm, except closed Mondays, and Wednesday afternoons. 1 October–31 May: Open Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays only, 10am–12 noon and 2pm–7pm. Entry free; no photography. Located at the Quartier Viénot, the 1st RE depot at Aubagne near Marseille in Provence, this original museum displays many pictures and historic relics and memorabilia. It also presents a number of mannequins tracing the basic evolution of Legion uniforms from 1831 to the present – but see below.

Musée de l'Uniforme de la Légion Étrangère

Domaine Capitaine Danjou, Puyloubier (13). Tel: (0)4 42 66 31 41

Opening hours: daily, 10am–12 noon and 2pm–5pm. Entry free; photography allowed. This second museum is at the foot of the Sainte-Victoire in the grounds of the Legion's retirement-care home – L'Institution des Invalides de la Légion Étrangère. (Be aware: at some future time it is planned to move it to a more accessible site near the original museum at the Aubagne depot.) It houses the great bulk of the Legion's very rich historic uniform collections; the curator is M. Raymond Guyader, indisputably today's leading historian of the subject.

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